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Knowing their Place: Identity and Aspiration in the Adult Learner Curriculum

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This thesis is submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Education (EdD)

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and there is nothing presented in this study that has been previously submitted for any degree awarded by either The Open University or any other academic institution. This work has not been previously published.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paula Faller', with a stylized, cursive script.

Paula Faller

September 2008

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But above all this is dedicated to Jenny, who else?

Chapter 1

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others

Weeks (1990) cited in Bufton (2003, p210)

Introduction

This research takes place in a college of further education in a large city in Ireland and focuses on the adult learner curriculum and practices in a Return to Education course for adult learners. The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which adult learners come to know their place and learn who or how to be when they return to formal education. The study questions what acceptable, legitimised and valid conceptualisations of the adult learner identity are ideologised in the adult learner curriculum and how these are mediated and co-constructed in the institutional and curricular practices. Through this study I hope to achieve a much clearer picture of the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations implicit in the adult learner curriculum and in the educational processes and practices in the college. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual tools of capital, habitus and field and building on St Clair's (2004) work on the aspirational myth in adult education, I use the adult learner curriculum as the medium for illuminating the processes of identity construction and examining the range of possibilities which may be open to adult learners as they negotiate the challenges of returning to formal education. Exposing and exploring the tensions implicit in the adult learner curriculum will offer myself and my colleagues in the adult education department a far greater understanding of the choices that we are offering to our students. This insight would afford both

staff and students more transparency and clarity about the choices available and the consequences of those choices for our learning and teaching.

Background

I work in a college of further education (FE) which is a constituent college of a larger group providing both second-level and further education. The college is located in an area of deemed disadvantage with high rates of unemployment and high percentages of early school leaving. The development plan (2001 – 2006) of the local area partnership¹ noted that a lack of educational qualifications posed a significant barrier towards accessing employment and that the educational qualifications of many people in the local area did not meet the requirements of the changing labour market and the growing economy. In Towards 2016 (2006), the government framework for social partnership agreement, commitment has been made ‘to provide learning opportunities for adults targeted at vulnerable groups and those in disadvantaged communities with low levels of educational attainment’.

Context

The interest in this research arises from my experiences as a course director for a full-time Return to Education programme for adult learners. This programme enables adult learners to return to education and gain a recognised qualification in social care. The qualifications are validated by the Further Education and

¹ Twelve local area-based social partnerships were established as part of a pilot project in 1992. They were given the responsibility of co-ordinating the activities of state agencies aimed at local disadvantaged groups. They had three core responsibilities – (1) help the long-term unemployed back into the job market (2) assist the development of local economic and employment projects and (3) support local community development groups. Each area partnership was required to establish a board that consisted of representatives from community interests, public agencies and social partners (Teague, 2006, p426)

Training Awards Council (FETAC)² and can be used as a gateway to higher education or employment. Many of those attending the course have left school early for various reasons such as having to go out to work to augment the family income; negative experiences of school; peer pressure; teenage pregnancy etc. Irrespective of the reason for leaving school early the vast majority of adult learners applying to do the course state that their main aim is to continue or finish the education they had missed out on in order to make changes in their lives. The changes identified generally relate to self-esteem and self-confidence, better employment opportunities and being able to help children with homework and be a role model for them in terms of valuing education (Reay et al, 2002).

Rationale

In common with many research projects, this study has arisen from a questioning of and a sense of unease about a number of issues relating to the course. This questioning has in itself undergone a metamorphosis during the research process. Along with the sense of unease I identified a feeling of what could be interpreted as defensiveness or maybe unwillingness to scrutinise the course too closely. I began to consider the educational and social processes and practices within the adult learner curriculum and the college through which adult learners came to have a sense of 'place'. I wanted to explore the implicit tensions in the curriculum around the aspirational behaviours and the ways in which they contributed towards the co-construction of adult learners' identities and I use the adult learner curriculum as a vehicle for exploring tensions such as support, expectations and assessment. Throughout this thesis the term 'adult

² See Glossary of Terms

learner curriculum' will be used to refer to the curriculum of the return to education course under scrutiny in this study.

Research questions

The overarching research question for this study is:

What are the desired aspirational behaviours that an adult learner needs to learn/acquire in order to fit in and through what practices are these behaviours mediated?

Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual tools of capital, habitus and field and St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth, the research poses the following questions:

1. In what ways does the notion of an aspirational myth of the 'adult learner' illuminate the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme
2. What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult education curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these 'right' kinds of knowledge?
3. In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital?
4. Through which practices in the educational institution are desired aspirational behaviours co-constructed?

The aspirational myth is partial, situational and is both decontextualised and recontextualised in different ways by adult learners, tutors and management in this particular return to education programme. I contend that the aspirational myth is the 'story' of the course and that it can be used to illuminate how the course functions on many different levels.

Theoretical framework

The study is informed by the work of Bourdieu and St Clair (2004). Bourdieu's analytical tools of capital, habitus and field offer a conceptual lens through which to explore the ways in which adult learners come to know their place when they return to formal education. For Bourdieu capital is a desirable resource, habitus is the durable dispositions agents bring to a field and the field is a social space within which agents struggle for positions of advantage. As Hodgkinson et al (2007, p30) note 'the impact of an individual on a learning culture depends on the combination of their position within that culture, their disposition towards that culture, and the various types of capital (social, cultural and economic) that they possess'.

Informed by the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein, St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth in an adult learner curriculum forms an important part of the theoretical framework for this research. Examining the curriculum as 'a mechanism for the regulation of the distribution of social and cultural capital', St Clair introduces the aspirational myth as an approach to curriculum analysis. Myth in this context is seen not as a falsehood but rather as 'the story of success which guides the learning taking place within adult education programmes'. The myth operates as an 'idealized identity' which is co-constructed by both learners

and instructors (St Clair, 2004, p81, 82). As St Clair (2004, p84) notes 'asking what a good student looks like is one way to understand the driving myth of the educational setting'. Thus the work of Bourdieu and St Clair (2004) provide the theoretical framework for this study as it sets out to question what acceptable, legitimised and valid conceptualisations of the adult learner are ideologised in the adult learner curriculum and in the institutional practices.

Located in an interpretive framework the thesis sets out to explore the specific processes in identity (re)construction of adult learners - namely those through which adult learners learn who to be and how to fit in - when they come back to a formal educational setting. I argue that adult learners returning to education need to acquire what Fleming and Murphy (1997) refer to as 'college knowledge' in order to fit in and construct an 'academic identity' amongst others. For Fleming and Murphy 'college knowledge' is the culture of the university and mature students have to learn the 'tricks of the trade' to become part of that culture. In the context of this study 'college knowledge' means the academic and social practices that adult learners have to negotiate and acquire in order to fit in to the culture of the college and the return to education course. Learning to fit in enables adult learners to gain access to the more privileged forms of capital available. Lankshear et al (1997) cited in Lawrence (2005, p19) assert that to 'feel comfortable in and perform with competence within a culture means becoming literate in that culture – becoming familiar with the multiplicity of new discourses in the culture'.

Research design

The study employs a qualitative case study approach in order to explore both the specific educational and social practices through which adult learners come to know their place and fit in and the varied and often contradictory expectations that are implicit in the adult learner curriculum. In this study I do not set out to test any pre-defined hypothesis but rather to explore the stories, experiences and understandings of adult learners and the ways in which they come to make meaning of returning to the formal educational setting.

The specific focus of this study is on the processes and practices of an adult education curriculum for a return to education programme. Data for the study were generated through analysis of course material and curricular documents (including course planning documents; FETAC module descriptors and documentation and college promotional literature) and through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with adult learners, tutors and managers. Informed by the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu and St Clair (2004) and the theoretical and empirical literature, the data was analysed using thematic analysis and the software programme NVivo 7 was used for data handling and management and organisation of the thematic analysis.

My own location as researcher

I enter this research as the course director for the social care strand of the Return to Education course and as a teacher in adult education for twelve years. I have also had the experience of returning to full-time formal education in the further education sector as an adult in my late thirties. Believing that adult learners need to become familiar with the different discourses and social

practices in the college in order to gain greater and more legitimate forms of capital, I had begun to question the ways in which adult learners were helped and supported to 'fit in' when they returned to formal education. I wanted to unpack and interrogate both the expectations that adult learners have of themselves and of the educational setting and those that we as educators have of adult learners. This led me in particular to question the issue of expectations and supports in the adult learner curriculum and to examine the level and nature of the supports offered. I also had questions concerning the specified curriculum and its dual aim of providing both a general education and a vocational qualification.

The significance of the study in relation to the existing literature

There is a paucity of published research on the further education (formerly and still sometimes referred to as the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) sector) in Ireland and relatively little research on adult education in colleges of further education. Most of the existing research focuses on the experiences of mature students in higher education. FE is a relatively new sector in the Irish educational arena. It is hoped that this research will help to apply, critically evaluate and build on St Clair's concept of the aspirational myth in relation to adult learner identity in the Irish FE context. By exploring the ways in which the aspirational myth helps to construct the adult learner identity and put forward desired aspirational behaviours in the adult learner curriculum it is hoped to gain a greater insight into the practices that are founded on these myths. By interviewing tutors, learners and managers it is hoped to gain a more diverse picture of the aspirational myths as perceived by the different social actors involved in the course. Achieving greater insight and understanding of

the practices within the curriculum will afford the opportunity for greater evaluation and planning of the choices and services that we provide for adult learners coming back to education. The concept of the aspirational myth has not been applied to a formal educational setting in either further or higher education in the Irish context to date (2008) and in doing so it is hoped that this study will build on and extend the work of St Clair and point to areas of future research drawing on this concept within further education settings. The study will contribute to the growing body of work by employing Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of capital, habitus and field in relation to its application to the adult learner curriculum. It is hoped that the study will add to the growing field of adult education research particularly in its exploration of the ways in which current practices legitimate different knowledges and capitals and in the investigation of the institutional habitus as a mediator of desired aspirational behaviours in the curriculum.

Structure and layout of the thesis

In Chapter 2 I provide a review and a critical evaluation of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature relating to the substantive research questions and I show how this research is informed by the key literature. In Chapter 3 I discuss the methodological literature and explain my choice of research methods showing why I feel these are the most appropriate and relevant for the research. I locate my own methodological stance, my position as researcher and my relationship with the respondents and discuss the impact of these on the research process. I consider the ethical implications of the research process.

Chapter 4 provides a description and analysis of the curriculum under scrutiny the aim of which is to identify points of tension among the interests and assumptions represented in its development and the implications of these for its enactment. Documentary data will be presented in the form of course planning material, the college prospectus, promotional literature and FETAC documentation including extracts from module descriptors and assessment material. In Chapter 5 I present the findings from the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with current and past students, course tutors and managers.

Chapter 6 explores the aspirational myths and the findings are used to illustrate and exemplify the key issues and what they look like in the adult learner curriculum. The chapter presents a discussion of how the research questions have been illuminated and answered by the data and I relate the discussion back to the theoretical framework, the key literature and to the research questions and offer implications for practice which will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 7. In the final chapter I evaluate the theoretical framework and methodology used in this study. In drawing conclusions I offer recommendations, implications for practice and for future research.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

‘...the spaces in which social practices occur affect the nature of those practices, who is “in place”, who is “out of place” and even who is allowed to be there at all.’

McDowell and Sharp (1997, p3) quoted in Leathwood (1999, p179)

‘...we know who we are not only because we ‘fit in’ well in some spaces but also because we do not ‘fit in’ - or we resist ‘fitting in’ - to others’.

Bufton (2006, p49)

Introduction

In this chapter I provide a critical discussion of the extant literature which has informed the substantive research questions and discuss the extent to which this literature offers some illumination of the research questions. The review includes both theoretical studies and empirical studies undertaken in both further and higher education. However, as Lynch (2006, p208) notes ‘interest in the mature student experience is a relatively new phenomenon within the Irish context’ and overall there is a paucity of research in the area of adult education and in particular the experiences of adult learners in the further education sector. Much of the research conducted on adult learners in Ireland relates to higher education rather than further education with the vast body of the work focused on access/widening participation and the experiences of mature students in higher education.

The chapter is organised into five main sections with each section framed around a key research question. In the first section I explicate Bourdieu’s conceptual framework and in particular his concepts of capital, habitus and field

and show how they offer an analytical lens with which to examine the relationship between the experience and expectations of our students and the desired aspirational behaviours implicit in the institutional practices in which we are engaged. The second section offers a critical reading of St Clair's (2004) work on the aspirational myth to explore the ways that the notion of the aspirational myth impacts on the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in the return to education programme. This conceptualisation of myth is therefore considered in relation to the theoretical and empirical literature on identity.

In the third section I use the literature on knowledge and curriculum as a framework to examine the ways in which different types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult learner curriculum. This informs my questions about the ways in which different and alternative 'ways of knowing' are constructed and perceived by tutors and learners. In the fourth section I consider the literature on assessment to provide a discussion of the ways in which access to more privileged forms of social and cultural capital is facilitated or denied to adult learners. In the final section I problematise the question of the practices through which the desired aspirational behaviours are co-constructed and how these behaviours may be taken up or rejected by adults returning to formal education. I do this through a discussion of selected literature on teaching, learning, expectations and support in adult learning.

Learning to 'fit in'

In this section I use Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field as an explanatory framework to address the key research question which asks what

are the desired aspirational behaviours adult learners need to learn or acquire in order to fit in when they return to formal education. The aspirational behaviours in the adult learner curriculum of the return to education course are those behaviours that adult learners are invited to take up, both implicitly and explicitly, in order to fit in. In order to take up these behaviours learners have to be able to negotiate and interpret the messages and rules of the educational setting. They also have to feel legitimated to do so. Doing this requires possessing legitimate forms of capital. Fleming and Murphy (1997, p4) in a study of mature students' experiences in higher education describe the culture of the university as 'college knowledge'. They define 'college knowledge' as the culture of the university with mature students 'learning the tricks of the trade' in order to become part of the college culture. Murphy and Fleming (2000, p77) argue that there is a conflict between 'the common-sense knowledge of the returning student and the college knowledge of the academy' with the academy validating 'objective knowledge' whereas adult education 'celebrates the subjective and the experiential'. In terms of Bourdieu's concept of field and how agents struggle for legitimation, college knowledge can be seen as 'learning to play the game'.

In the context of this study learning to negotiate 'college knowledge' is coming to know what's expected of adult learners in the culture of a return to education course in further education and in the vocational culture associated with a social care qualification. I argue that in order to gain access to and acquire more privileged forms of capital adult learners need to acquire this 'college knowledge' that incorporates both academic and social practices and different forms of 'knowing'. I explore the extent to which the day to day practices

within the curriculum and the culture of the institution facilitate or deny the acquisition and legitimation of these knowledges.

Bourdieu (1984) cited in Reay et al (2005, p32, 33) states 'the embodied capital of the previous generations functions as a sort of advance (both a head-start and a credit) which...enables the newcomer to start acquiring the basic elements of the legitimate culture, from the beginning'. In this study if adult learners coming back to education have the types of capital that equate with the head-start referred to by Bourdieu then it will be easier for them to fit in and not feel out of place. As Skeggs (2004, p48) notes, Bourdieu's metaphors 'enable us to understand who *can* move and who *cannot*, and what the mobile/fixed bodies require as resources to gain access to different spaces'.

Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field as a conceptual lens

Bourdieu locates his work in constructivist structuralism. From a structuralist perspective, Bourdieu believes that there are objective structures that are present in the social world 'independently of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations'. Therefore agents to some extent are constrained by social structures but yet can act to transform and construct them. The capacity and ability of agents to do this however is dependent on one's position in a social field which is in turn influenced by one's habitus and the volume and forms of capital one possesses.

Capital

The term capital can be explained as ‘a resource which yields power’ (Formosa, 2002, p119). Individuals and groups draw upon a variety of cultural, social and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order (Swartz, 1997, p73) and these different forms of capital enable people to gain control and status in relation to others and in their particular social field. However these capitals must be seen as legitimate before they can be perceived as holding value.

Bourdieu conceptualised four different types of capital namely economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Economic capital comprises income, wealth and the financial assets a person may hold. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can be present in three forms:

- a) Embodied capital – relates to the mind and the body and exists within
- b) Objectified – this takes the form of cultural goods, art etc
- c) Institutionalised – this is cultural capital in the form of knowledge, skills and education

Social capital is created by building relationships through family, social contacts and networks and connections with others. Symbolic capital occurs when the various forms of capital are validated as legitimate and when they confer power to those who hold them. Bourdieu maintains that any capital must be legitimised before it can be regarded as symbolic capital (Skeggs, 1997, p8). In this study symbolic capital will be taken to mean formal accreditation and qualifications; social capital as the relationships and networks established through college practices and cultural capital as the academic knowledge that is

valued and recognised in higher education. Reay et al (2005, p20) argue that cultural capital should not be solely viewed in terms of 'educational qualifications and participation in high status activities' noting that cultural capital is also the ability to 'deploy knowledge, skills and competences successfully'.

Habitus

Habitus is a key conceptual tool with which to explore the notion of fitting in and knowing one's place. In the game of education 'differentials in habitus ensure that not everyone plays the game on equal terms'. Those with a greater knowledge of the implicit rules have an advantage over those who don't and have greater access to the prize of capital which is 'the outcome of the game of education' (Bowl (2003, p126).

Bourdieu (1992) cited in Skeggs (2004, p145) sees habitus as 'an internal organising mechanism which learns, as a result of social positioning, how to play the game; dispositions arise from the fields to which one has access, knowledge and experience'. According to Webb et al (2002, p36) habitus allows us 'to respond to cultural rules and contexts in a variety of ways...but the responses are largely determined by where (and who) we have been in a culture'. Bourdieu also conceived of habitus as embodied as well as dispositional explaining it as 'expressed through durable ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu, 1990) cited in Reay (2004, p432). Bourdieu uses the term habitus to imply a 'sense of one's place' but also a 'sense of the place of others' (Bourdieu, 1989, p19). It is the 'mediating link between

individuals' subjective worlds and the cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others' (Jenkins, 1992, p75).

Bufton (2003, p232) suggests that habitus 'captures both the inter-subjective nature of social class and its 'objective' and 'subjective' referents'. Habitus therefore is a concept that includes cultural, economic and also experiential aspects of class and is therefore a more extensive concept than class for this particular research. Reay (1997, p229) argues that 'habitus continues to operate long after the objective conditions of its emergence have been dislodged'. In this study I employ the term habitus in relation to adult learners to incorporate both their social and familial habitus.

Institutional habitus

Two particular contextualisations of habitus are significant for this research – institutional habitus (Reay, 1998; Reay et al 2001; Thomas, 2002a; Bufton, 2003, 2006; Reay et al, 2005) and vocational habitus (Colley et al 2002, 2003; James et al, 2007). Institutional habitus can be seen in one way as the culture of an organisation. Mintzberg et al (1998) cited in Greenbank (2007, p211) observes that the 'culture or habitus of an institution acts as an important mediator or filter' through which values, knowledge and practices deemed to be acceptable and desirable in an organisation are transmitted. Yorke and Thomas (2003, p67) in a study of student retention in higher education note that institutional habitus is not only the culture of an institution but also the 'relational issues and priorities that are deeply embedded and subconsciously inform practice' and Smith (2003) argues that the ethos of an educational setting can be seen as its habitus and as the 'aspects of a school's culture, climate and philosophy'. The

specified and hidden curricula and the ways in which they are devised, enacted and experienced are part of the institutional habitus. In this study I take the concept of institutional habitus to mean the culture, ethos and relationships within the return to education course and the college through which different knowledges, practices and behaviours are validated via the adult learner curriculum and I use the concept to explore the ways in which different aspirational behaviours are affirmed and legitimated. Throughout the thesis I draw on the terms ethos and culture as reflective of the institutional habitus. For example, in the study an adult education ethos (or habitus) is one based on the idea of the course as a partnership between students and teachers and on the assumption that adult learners coming back to education can draw on their subjective life experience as the basis for their learning. I use the term mainstream/mainstream ethos to reflect an institutional habitus equating with normal or conventional where distinctions are not made between traditional and non-traditional students and where learning programmes are not designed specifically for adult learners.

Fitting in and belonging requires a sense of justification and legitimation. The literature shows that for many adult learners the feeling that they do not 'belong' in higher education means that this legitimation does not come easily. They position themselves as 'outsiders' and feel that education is not for the 'likes of them' (Weil, 1989; Reay et al, 2005; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bufton, 2006; Tranter, 2006). Although these empirical studies relate to adult learners in higher education and the institutional habitus of higher education is very different from that of further education colleges, there are similarities in the way each works to filter the values and knowledges that are deemed

legitimate in each particular setting. The FE college, for example, also incorporates elements of the vocational habitus (Colley et al 2002, 2003) associated with the specific vocational courses offered.

The ways in which adult learners come to fit in and 'know their place' are influenced by where they're coming from (their habitus), the types of resources they bring with them and those available for them to acquire (different forms of capital) and knowing what they're coming into (interactions with other social agents and actors in the social and cultural field). Thomas (2002a, p431) suggests that educational institutions need to explore and understand 'the different institutional practices that can impact on the extent to which students feel they are accepted'. This idea will inform two important areas of investigation in this study. Firstly I will explore the dissonance or congruence between students' habituses (comprised of their familial and social habituses) and the institutional habitus of the college. Secondly, I will investigate the extent to which our institutional habitus is enhanced by the current 'open door' policy intended to foster supportive relationships between staff and students.

Field

For Bourdieu, a field means 'a certain distribution of some kind of capital' (Bourdieu, 1980). Fields may be defined as 'structured spaces that are organized around specific types of capital or combinations of capital' (Swartz, 1997, p117). Fields are dynamic and fluid and are also concerned with the interactions between institutions, rules and practices. In any field social actors are engaged in accessing and harnessing different resources. Fields can be determined by what's at stake (in terms of the different forms of resources) in any particular

field. Thus in the case of the educational setting, 'intellectual distinction' (that is education) is the key resource at stake (Jenkins, 1992, p84).

In their study of community based further education Gallacher et al (2007, p502) found the concepts of field and habitus to be useful towards developing 'an understanding of the ways in which the dispositions and practices of both learners and staff have been shaped, and have in turn shaped the learning cultures'. Reay et al (2005, p28) state 'when habitus enters a field with which it is not familiar however, the resulting disjunctures can generate change and transformation but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty'. The field under scrutiny in this research study is the return to education curriculum within the wider field of further education in Ireland.

Significance of capital, habitus and field

In this section I have explored how Bourdieu's conceptual tools of capital, habitus and field provide a critical lens for this study. Although criticism has been levelled at some of Bourdieu's concepts in terms of their potentially deterministic orientation, (Jenkins, 1992), Reay (2004, p75) notes that Bourdieu perceived his concepts 'as adaptable to specific empirical contexts rather than as general models or rigid frameworks'. Tett (2000, p185) argues for Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus 'as a way of understanding individuals as a 'complex amalgam of their past and present but an amalgam that is always in the process of completion and therefore open to change'. She notes that Bourdieu sees habitus as 'no more fixed than the practices which it helps to structure' (Bourdieu, 1984 cited in Tett, 2000, p185). This has relevance for this study in terms of examining, for example, the support and assessment practices

in the adult learner curriculum through which the institutional habitus of the college can work to facilitate the habituses that adult learners bring rather than working to position them as 'other'. Facilitating learners' habituses can work to bridge the 'knowledge gap' identified by Murphy and Fleming (2000, p78) rather than alienate adult learners who may already construct themselves as 'impostors in the academic setting' (Bufton, 2006, p16).

Having introduced Bourdieu's analytical tools as theoretical framework I now move on to discuss the concept of myth and in particular how St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth provides a framework for interrogating the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in the return to education curriculum.

The aspirational myth – adult learners' identity, subject position and sense of place

Conceptualising myth

Myth can be defined in several ways. It can be seen as a parable or an allegory which is a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone. Mythology can be seen as a body of myths or as one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society. Weiss (1988, p33) cited in Sandlin (2004, p89) describes myth as 'a complex of profoundly held attitudes and values which condition the way men view the world and understand their experience'. This idea is also evident in Cohen's (1969) discussion of the seven main theories and explanations of myth. Two explanations of myth are particularly pertinent. The first is the explanation of myth in terms of its role in 'creating and maintaining social solidarity, cohesion

etc' and the second is that which 'stresses its function in legitimating social institutions and social practices' (Cohen, 1969, p338). St Clair (2004) uses the idea of the aspirational myth as an approach to curriculum analysis conceptualising it as an 'idealized identity' which is co-constructed by both learners and instructors (St Clair, 2004, p81, 82). It is the story of how to 'become' the good, exemplary or archetypal adult learner who will succeed because they have learned the implicit rules and behaviour required for success and they have learned how to play the game accordingly. This study will utilise these accounts of myth to analyse the types of practices that legitimate and privilege certain knowledges and ways of being in the adult learner community, the ways in which social and educational practices in the curriculum are legitimated and whose ideological interests are served in these practices.

The context of St Clair's work differs significantly from that of this research study. Firstly, St Clair's research focuses on a union training programme for unemployed people in a Western Canadian city. The purpose of the programme was to train long-term welfare recipients for employment as cooks. This study centres on a return to education course in further education which is open to any adult learner irrespective of their economic or social circumstances. Secondly, in St Clair's study only instructors were interviewed although he did carry out participant and non-participant observations and informal conversations with course participants. This study examines the aspirational myth from the perspective of adult learners, course tutors and managers. Looking at how the myth applies in the context of the return to education course and questioning how the aspirational myth is experienced by learners and perceived by tutors and managers extends the scope of St Clair's work and

addresses some of the implications for teaching and research identified in his concluding sections.

The myth of success

Sandlin and St Clair (2003), Sandlin and Cervero (2003) and Sandlin (2003, 2004) have all explored programmes for welfare recipients focusing on a theme of success constructed around participants' attitudes and motivations and placing the responsibility of coming off benefits and retraining firmly with participants rather than as a co-operative responsibility of both the state and participants. This myth of success is constructed around an increasing expectation reflected in both rhetoric and policy that welfare participants can 'create their own ways out of poverty'.

Sandlin (2004) conducted interviews, participant observations and also analysed documents such as brochures, formal curriculum materials, programme reports etc in a case study of an adult literacy and job-training programme. She explains the myth of success in the U.S as 'the belief that every person, as a result of hard work and effort, can create the life they want for themselves' (Sandlin, 2004, p89). The implication here is that motivation and hard work enables people to acquire the capital necessary to transform their lives. This myth of the transformative power of education if the person has the right attitude and motivations also has significance in this study. For example the question of the extent to which the myth of success works to negatively position as uninterested and lacking in commitment a learner who may be struggling with attendance, punctuality and meeting assignment deadlines due to external circumstances in their lives will be investigated.

Sandlin explores how the myth of success is played out in the classroom examining how teachers and students explain how to achieve success. This has relevance for this study where I will examine the types of desirable behaviours that equate with success or with being a 'good' student and explore how these may be reinforced and legitimated by both staff and learners alike.

Other studies highlight the conflict between policy discourse and the ways in which learners are constructed. Avis et al (2002) explored constructions of learners taking GNVQs in further education and related these to policy discourses of FE. Whereas policy discourse stressed the centrality of students taking responsibility for their own learning, the study found that tutors perceived learners as 'lacking in confidence and motivation as a result of their previous educational experience' and constructed them as in need of a great degree of help and support to enable them to succeed. The 'ideal GNVQ student managed their own learning by asking for help and responding to the advice they were given' whereas mature students were constructed as wanting to be 'spoon fed' resulting in 'an uphill battle' to encourage students to think for themselves (Avis et al, 2002, p36-38). The desired aspirational behaviours of the 'ideal' independent adult learner in this case are constructed as being able to seek out help from tutors and then act on the feedback. Avis's study is important for this research in two main ways. Firstly because it relates to a vocational programme in further education and secondly because it points to a key area for investigation for this study regarding the extent to which the support practices within the course help (or hinder) adult learners to develop the confidence to seek, interpret and construe feedback that is part of the independent learner identity.

Whereas the studies cited above explore specific educational programmes, Grummell (2007) turns her attention to a study of adult education policies in Ireland in recent years. She explores what she describes as the 'second-chance myth' surrounding the role of adult education arguing that current adult education policies are imbued with discourses of 'individualism, consumerism and market competitiveness'. This she contends fosters 'a belief in individuals' own responsibility to improve their employability and life chances' (Grummell, 2007, p182). The impact of changing adult education policy is important to this study and raises the question for investigation as to the extent to which this focus on individual responsibility exerts pressure on both adult learners and course tutors to emphasise accreditation over gaining knowledge for its own sake.

The studies of Sandlin (2004) and Grummell (2007) are useful for illuminating the research questions in this study particularly in relation to the ways in which the adult learner identity is constructed in the course and the impact of this for the practices through which the desired aspirational behaviours are co-constructed. At a macro level Grummell's study provides a lens with which to view the policy framework in which adult education in Ireland is located and how this filters down to the micro level of college practices. If the discourse of adult education is one of individual responsibility does this place the entire responsibility on adult learners to acquire the capitals (in the form of knowledge and skills) to gain better employment and improve their life chances? If this is the case then the onus is placed on the student to gain this capital by fitting and assimilating into the college culture. Macdonald and Stratta (2001) studied tutors' responses to non-traditional learners in higher education and found that

they expected learners to integrate into the culture of the university thus abdicating responsibility on the part of the college and staff in terms of supporting and helping adult learners to fit in. Murphy and Fleming (1998, p4) observe that students have to learn to compromise to meet the 'demands of the college'. They note that '...the college never compromises. The students themselves are always on the losing end, and the process of skills learning, of playing the game, is the only realistic way students have of losing less'. Although both these studies refer to mature students in higher education the notion of fitting in is integral to this study and the issues and problems of learning to fit in to an unfamiliar culture will be similar for a further education context. This study will question whether students are 'on the losing end' in current college support practices and the ways in which adult learners' emerging and changing academic (and other) identities are supported as part of the process of fitting in.

The next section examines different conceptualisations of identity and argues for the social constructionist view of identity in this study and then moves on to consider the different constructions of adult learners in the theoretical and empirical literature.

Theorising identity

Identity is a much contested concept. Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p3, 4) offer three main theoretical conceptualisations that inform modern ideas of identity. The first is an essentialist perspective which posits that identity is a fixed, stable and unitary entity that governs human action. A second perspective theorises identity as the product of social relations. The third perspective is a discursive

approach where identity is socially constructed where 'there is no such thing as an absolute self, lurking behind discourse'. This perspective sees identity construction as 'an ambiguous process that is always unstable, multiple and in formation' (Chappell et al, 2003, p33). Such a social constructionist approach offers a way of understanding identity and who we are as it is 'accomplished, disputed, ascribed, resisted, managed and negotiated in discourse' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p4). It is in such an approach to identity that this study is located.

Identity as a social construction

St Clair's concept of the aspirational myth is based on the premise of an 'idealised identity', co-constructed by both tutors and learners, representing the 'end-point of learning' (St Clair, 2004, p81). This archetype can represent the 'good' or 'ideal' learner and the desirable 'cognitive, personal and behavioural characteristics' that guide learners towards success. However it is necessary to interrogate such a conceptualisation of the aspirational myth from a socio-constructivist perspective. It could be argued that the notion of an idealised identity reflects an essentialist notion of a fixed identity or an archetype that all learners are guided towards. This essentialist 'fixed' archetype can also be made manifest in the ways that negative or undesirable traits or characteristics are not legitimated in day to day practices. However as St Clair (2004, p86) observes, 'identity is not individual but neither is it social. It can be considered as the co-implication of the social and the individual'. Although the concept of an idealised adult learner identity could be viewed as essentialist, its construction, interpretation and mediation are contextualised and contingent and are both either taken up or rejected accordingly in different ways by the different social

actors in this study. In keeping with Norquay's (1990, p291) concept of identity as 'multiple, shifting and contradictory' this study takes a view of identity as fluid and dynamic, contingent and contextualised. As Wakeford (1994, p242), drawing on Hall (1990), suggests, adult students' 'identity can best be described as a form of continual production rather than a finished product'.

A socio-constructivist view of identity allows us to 'come to know our place in the varied contexts our lives (MacLure, 1993, p377). Coldron and Smith (1999, p713) suggest that people learn to know where they are and who they are by knowing their proper relation to other people. This, they argue, is essence of the phrase 'to know one's place'. Bourdieu's concept of habitus has explanatory power here also. For Bourdieu habitus gives us a sense of place but in relation to others. Habitus must also be understood in relation to the field within which it is operational. Knowing one's place is affected by the strong societal (and community) influences of power, culture, gender etc. These views have significance for this study. Part of the process of 'fitting in' involves the (re)construction and (re)negotiation of fragmented identities as learners face unfamiliar discourses that can pose both threat and opportunity for both existent and emergent habituses.

The next section draws on some of the empirical literature to show the ways in which adult learners are constructed in the literature.

'Second-chance' learners

The construction of adult learners as 'second-chance' learners positions them as either not having had the opportunity to finish their education at a younger age

or as having failed the first time round. Learners are now seen as having been given a second chance to rectify this situation, redeem themselves or make right. McFadden (1995, p54) contends that for some adults coming into 'second chance' programmes their previous background of educational experience has served 'to construct for them student identities which they may find difficult to jettison'. Reay (2002, p404) comments that the 'uncredentialed' can be constructed as 'unfinished...or incomplete in some way' arguing that this puts forward a deficit view of those who did not complete compulsory education irrespective of the reason. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003, p599) argue that 'non-traditional' students are 'pathologized' and constructed as 'deficient: in ability, in not having a 'proper' educational background, or in lacking the appropriate aspirations and attitudes'.

Constructions of adult learners as 'adult returners', 'second-chance learners' or learners coming back to 'settle old educational scores' are not unproblematic and have implications for policy and practice at institutional level. For example, Clarke (2003, p30) argues that by offering women 'a "Fresh Start" in order to "Return to Work" or to take a "Second Chance" at their education' it implicitly assumes that 'they have somehow gone astray, and need to set off again in the right direction'. Clarke remarks that the term 'family responsibilities' is often cited in educational research as one of the barriers to continuing education for women. Both Britton and Baxter (1999, p181) and Read et al (2003, p265) show how mature women students can be seen as a 'problem' because of their family responsibilities and the need for flexibility in timetables or the provision of childcare facilities. But Hanson (1996, p103) argues that having 'discrete groups to keep all mature students together' mature students are constructed as

‘different to other students’. She also cautions that a ‘timetable between 10 am and 3pm, aimed to assist those with childcare responsibilities, alienated some who wanted a full working day as a student’.

In the FE sector, O’Brien and O’Fathaigh (2007, p175) argue that lack of time and resources available to FE providers results in well-intentioned interventions amounting to ‘paternalistic/maternalistic responses rather than posing fundamental challenges to the system itself’. All of these studies afford significance for this research in relation to the nature and types of supports offered to adult learners and the issue of flexibility of timetabling noted earlier and both will be revisited in Chapter 5 and again in the discussion in Chapter 6.

‘Not for the likes of me’ –risk and opportunity

Wakeford (1994) found that many mature students taking on the identity of ‘mature student’ faced what she identifies as the ‘social risk’ of feeling out of place in the educational institution and also the potential social risk of feeling out of place at home and with friends. It is akin to a sense of disjuncture. Adult women students in particular worried about the tension between the conceptions of themselves as ‘mother and wife’ and at the same time ‘student’ (Wakeford, 1994, p248). This concept of social risk is important in this study for investigating the types of desired aspirational behaviours constructed in the adult learner curriculum. Adult learners may choose to accept or reject the aspirational behaviours however both actions carry different sets of risks. Juggling multiple roles, establishing new identities while letting go (or sometimes holding on) to the older ones all present a risk and uncertainty for

them. As Baxter and Britton (2001, p89) observe 'a sense of 'dislocation, a fragmentation or compartmentalization of self' is common learners' stories.

Other empirical studies focus on the ways in which mature students position themselves as 'other' and construct their identity in relation to other students by drawing on words such as 'us' and 'them' (Thompson, 1997; Wakeford, 1994) and on the sense of community amongst mature students in higher education (Reay et al, 2002). A combination of 'frequent resistance' to non-traditional students in pre-1992 universities coupled with broadening access policies means that many mature students access higher education through the post-1992 universities and FE sector where they assume they will find 'people like us' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). These studies point to the importance for adult learners, whether on access courses, in higher education or further education of building social capital and social networks in order to help them gain a sense of place. They pose questions for this study as to the extent to which the social capitals (such as supporting others, relationships, caring etc) that adult learners bring with them when they return to education are (or could be) recognised and fostered through the practices and institutional habitus.

Valid and legitimate knowledge in the adult learner curriculum

This section provides a discussion of the literature in order to illuminate the question of which knowledges are legitimated in the adult learner curriculum. Embedded in this question is the issue of why particular types of knowledge are legitimated and others are not and who regulates this legitimation. If adults returning to education want to acquire different knowledges to those they bring with them in order to fit in, to what extent are their existing ways of knowing

recognised and valued? The first part of this section offers a brief discussion of different assumptions about knowledge and the curriculum; the second section provides a critique of the adult learner curriculum in this study drawing on the empirical literature and the final section considers tacit knowledge and the hidden curriculum.

Knowledge production and the curriculum

Ogunleye (2002, p177) suggests that colleges of further education have control over the way the curriculum is structured and delivered even though they may not have control over its content. Jarvis (2004, p248) notes that the content or subject matter of some courses ‘especially those that are vocationally oriented or award bearing, is usually prescribed by the examining or the validating body’. This is particularly relevant in the case of FETAC awards where in many cases, up to 75% of the course content is prescribed³ and within each module the content is prescribed in the form of specific learning outcomes (SLOs) which are then assessed via projects, assignments and/or examinations. Jarvis goes on to suggest that ‘the curriculum may be regarded as a selection of culture made by those who have status or power within the profession or within education’. This study will investigate the ways in which the different interests and influences of various stakeholders have shaped the adult learner curriculum.

Many teachers view the curriculum as the specific content to be delivered through the academic year. In their study of the perceptions of the curriculum by academics in higher education Fraser and Bosanquet (2006, p272) contend that some staff view the curriculum as imposed and that it consequently limits

³ In terms of specified mandatory modules

academic freedom. Although their work relates to higher education it has relevance for this study where I will examine the extent to which the FETAC model affords flexibility or constraint in the adult learner curriculum aimed at providing both a vocational qualification but also a general broad-based education. The study will also evaluate the extent to which course tutors and managers view the current curriculum as opportunity or constraint in their practices with adult learners.

The FETAC vocational curriculum in this study seeks to provide learners with theoretical knowledge ('know that'), technical knowledge and skills ('know how') and the development of core skills. Bridges (1993, p45) makes the distinction between core skills (or cross-curricular skills) and transferable (or generic) skills. Core skills are those that can be applied 'across a range of cognitive domains and transferable skills those that are applied across different social contexts. Examples of core skills are communication, numeracy and problem solving whereas transferable skills are interpersonal communication, team working and management skills. This distinction is not made in FETAC documentation where 'core skills' are seen to include examples of both types outlined by Bridges and emphasis is placed on their development as necessary skills for the world of work.

Tacit knowledge and the hidden curriculum

Wfis (1986, p241) defines the hidden curriculum as 'the day to day interactions and regularities of classrooms and schools that tacitly teach important norms and values'. Snyder (1970) cited in Anderson (2002, p3) defines the hidden curriculum in higher education as 'the way in which the various participants

played the game, read the cues, adapted to their immediate educational circumstances'. A learner whose habitus is more closely reflective of the institutional habitus will be able to interpret the cues of the hidden curriculum much more easily. The hidden curriculum incorporates the practices and power relationships in the educational institution which are reflected in interactions amongst learners, tutors and management. Bowl (2003, p123-124) found that the non-traditional learners in her study were 'failed again by the hidden curriculum of university life' and felt powerless in an institution where 'the rules were implicit rather than explicit'. A key area for investigation in this study is to explore the ways in which adult learners come to learn what is expected of them as part of the process of fitting in and how these expectations are transmitted implicitly via the hidden curriculum. It also ties in with the question posed earlier concerning the degree of dissonance or congruence of learners' habituses with the institutional habitus and how learners whose habituses are more closely aligned to that of the institution will come to learn the 'rules of the game' more easily.

Keddie (1980, p49) argues that the 'needs' of adult learners are subjugated in the curriculum that is subject-led rather than learner-centred. Mee and Wiltshire (1978) quoted in Keddie (1980, p54) argue that while provision of adult education programmes is generally seen as a 'response to demand' that different institutional settings 'create' different emphases in demand. This fits in with a provider's model based on how educational institutions see adult learners and what they think adult learners want. However as Read et al (2003, p262) note 'individuals do not passively 'receive discourses of academic culture: they actively engage with them and sometimes challenge them'.

The arguments of both Mee and Wiltshire and Read et al raise two important interrelated issues here for this study. Firstly the development of the curriculum is influenced by competing interests, for example, further education/vocational training and adult education policy and these must be explored in any analysis of the curriculum. Secondly, adult learners can and do accept or reject the desired aspirational behaviours that are transmitted through the various practices in the curriculum.

Ecclestone (1999, p335) discusses New Labour's educational policy of lifelong learning referring to a conversation with Alan Tuckett of NIACE. Tuckett argues that many adults who have been socially and educationally marginalised believing that 'education is not for the likes of us' may need stronger direction and 'propelling' towards the 'liberating possibilities' that education can bring. Ecclestone (1999) conceives this as an emerging growth of state regulation and argues that in post-compulsory education in Britain government commitments to 'inclusive and relevant learning' implicate notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' learners. Citing Edwards (1997), she suggests that the discourse of participation will lead to a label of 'non-learners' for those reluctant to subscribe to the types of learning and programmes that will become desirable.

Ecclestone's idea of a label of 'non-learners' for those reluctant to take up learning opportunities is something that will be considered in this study. The adult learner curriculum includes both assessed and non-assessed subjects. Ecclestone's point raises a tension between learners' agency and autonomy in being able to choose which subjects to attend and a possible construction of an 'à la carte' learner by tutors and other learners of those learners who are

selective in their choice of subjects. It also has relevance in relation to the implications of a growing emphasis on gaining accreditation which has been raised earlier in this chapter.

Summary

Drawing on the theoretical and empirical literature this section has explored issues of knowledge and the curriculum and considered the types of knowledge that are validated in the adult learner curriculum. The next section draws on the literature on assessment to examine the ways in which adult learners are facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of cultural and symbolic capital.

Accessing more privileged forms of capital

Assessment

Assessment is one of the key ways through which adult learners come to know their place and fit in when they return to formal education. The processes of assessment are fundamental to the facilitation or denial of access to greater and more privileged forms of capital. The symbolic capital at stake here is the accreditation and formal certification in the form of a recognised qualification which is the passport to a better life. Assessment is integral to the process of learning yet for so many adult learners it is a negative throwback to their previous experiences of tests and exams in the school system. Boud (1995) cited in Sambell and McDowell (1998, p239) emphasises the influence of prior educational experiences and how learners carry with them the 'totality of their experiences of learning and being assessed'. Murphy and Fleming (2000, p82)

observe that much of this anxiety relates to adult learners not knowing what is expected of them.

The grades and scores in formal assessment give learners a sense of place not only in terms of academic achievement but also a sense of place in relation to the peer group. Leathwood (2005, p307-308) observes that assessment is used 'to provide a rationale and legitimacy for the social structures and power relations of modern day societies, and for one's place within these'. Certain knowledges are legitimated through assessment and Leathwood explains that assessment is concerned with 'what is taught and what is valued within our education systems. It can influence not only how we see ourselves, but also our social relations with others and how we see them'. Ecclestone (2007a, p324) cautions that 'specific assessment activities such as grading, feedback and questioning can explicitly or implicitly reinforce ego or a sense of self as an unsuccessful or successful learner or focus solely on performance and achievement in the form of a good or poor grade'.

In most institutions, teachers are central to the process of assessment. They set the tasks and develop the programme of teaching that should help learners gain the knowledge, skills and other requirements to pass the assessment. According to Leach et al (2001, p294), teachers are 'an authority acting on behalf of society and a discipline'. The role of the teacher is to judge if a learner 'replicates appropriately the discipline's beliefs about 'truth' (Leach et al, 2001, p 295). Not only does this reflect the concept of 'place' but also implicates reward to the student who has internalised the types of knowledge required to pass the particular type of assessment, who can reproduce the knowledge in the desired

form and who has learned and acquired the necessary 'academic literacy'. Leach et al (2000) caution that in order 'to pass through the gates the learner must perform a dance carefully choreographed by examiners'. Similarly, Boud (1995, p39) quoted in Sambell and McDowell (1998, p392) argues that every act of assessment gives a message to students about what is important to learn and how to learn it. These messages are 'coded' and therefore interpreted differently by learners and tutors.

Young (2000, p410) studied mature students' feeling about assessment on assignments and found conflicting arguments in the literature regarding the effects of assessment on adult students. She cites Knowles (1988, p88) who states that adults feel 'childlike' when judged by other adults. Knowles views this as 'disrespect and dependency'. However Hanson (1996, p103) suggests that adult learners are '...are prepared to suspend their adulthood at the door of the institution... [...]...and are only too willing to submit themselves to its constraints'. In her study Young found that some students viewed assignments and feedback as 'only work'. However, for students whose self-esteem was lower, their 'whole sense of self was at stake' (Young, 2000, p409). Young's study has pertinence to this research particularly in relation to the ways in which adult learners' perceptions and negotiation of assessment, grades and feedback impacts on their sense of place and in relation to assessment as a gatekeeper of access to more privileged forms of capital.

Methods of assessment

Maclellan (2001, p315), in her study of the different perceptions of tutors and students of assessment, found that tutors tended to rely on one or two modes

of assessment (e.g. essay or short written answers). Maclellan argues for the use of more 'real life' forms of assessment e.g. case studies, reflective diaries, video and audiotape presentations etc which can be mapped onto potential experiences that one may encounter in the work place. In this study I consider the issue of whether an over-reliance on written assessment in the FETAC-led adult education curriculum may in fact compromise learners' achievement in assessment (thus limiting their access to greater forms of capital) and whether written forms of assessment are considered more legitimate (and more valid as capital for progression to higher education) than those suggested by Maclellan.

Assessment and autonomy

In a discussion of autonomy and learning Ecclestone (2000, p147) suggests that autonomy can be procedural (e.g. technical); personal (e.g. practical, relating to one's own practice) and critical (which she suggests should be ultimately emancipatory). Current assessment processes in the adult returner curriculum largely favour procedural autonomy. There are set criteria to be met and, as Ecclestone (2000, p148) notes, assessment that encourages procedural autonomy, 'whether knowingly or unwittingly, prioritises the checking of whether these criteria have been met, or key aspects covered, and emphasises quantity of information and its replication'. She argues that at a particular point 'making outcomes and criteria explicit moves from a genuine attempt to provide a flexible basis for dialogue in an assessment community to a straitjacket'. Similarly Torrance et al (2005, p46) argue that:

The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the

more likely the candidates are to succeed; but succeed at what? Transparency of objectives, coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them, is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved ... assessment procedures and practices come completely to dominate the learning experience, and 'criteria compliance' comes to replace 'learning'

The points raised by Ecclestone (2000) and Torrance et al (2005) are again significant for this study in relation to the tension around expectations and support. They raise questions as to whether current assessment/support practices facilitate learning and the development of adult learners' independence or whether they amount to prescription of what is needed to meet assessment criteria. As Torrance (1993) cited in Ecclestone (2000, p156) emphasises assessment should be at the heart of teaching and learning rather than an afterthought or an 'instrumental process to generate summative targets'.

Summary

This section has used the literature on assessment to explore the ways in which adult learners are facilitated or denied more privileged forms of capital. Learners rely on assessment practices to give them a sense of place in relation to peers but also in relation to their past experiences and sense of self. Assessment practices can reinforce and support an emerging 'academic' identity as learners come to know what's expected of them and gain the requisite knowledge and skills for academic practices through formal assessment.

The co-constructing practices

This final section draws on the theoretical and empirical literature to illuminate the practices through which desired aspirational behaviours are co-constructed in the adult learner curriculum. The first part offers an explication and critique of the theories of adult learning in order to explore the types of practices that different theories inform and imply and the second section examines the tension between support and expectations in the adult learner curriculum.

Theories of adult learning

As Merriam et al (2007, p83) observe ‘there is no single theory of adult learning. Instead we have a number of frameworks, or models, each of which contributes something to our understanding of adults as learners’. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) cited in Murphy (2003, p1) note that ‘the physical and social experiences and situations in which learners find themselves and the tools they use in that experience are integral to the entire learning process’. With this in mind, in this section I consider the relevant literature in order to critique practices in the adult learner curriculum and the co-construction of adult learner identity. I draw on learning theories such as experiential learning, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning and situated learning. A brief critique of andragogy is also relevant in relation to the ways in which adult learners may be perceived as self-directed autonomous learners and the implications of this for supports and expectations in the adult learner curriculum.

Experiential learning

For Illeris (2007, p87, 88) experiential learning must involve three dimensions - content (e.g. knowledge, skills, abilities), incentive (e.g. emotions, motivations)

and interaction (e.g. communication, co-operation). Illeris suggests that within these three dimensions of learning two processes are at work – interaction processes between the learners and their surroundings and inner mental acquisition and elaboration processes which link new interactions to earlier learning (Murphy, 2003, p3). Likewise Boud and Miller (1996) quoted in Jarvis (2004, p91) outline five propositions on which experiential learning is based. They suggest that experience is the foundation of, and stimulus for, learning; that learners actively construct their own experience; that learning is holistic; it is socially and culturally constructed and finally, learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs.

In their situated approach to learning Boud and Walker (2002, p97) see context as ‘...the single most important influence on reflection and learning’ and define context as the ‘total cultural, social and political environment in which reflection takes place’. Their model also takes into account how learners’ ‘past histories, learning strategies, and emotion influence the sort of learning developed through reflection on experience’ (Merriam et al, 2007, p165). Similarly Jarvis (2004, p111) acknowledges the importance of learners’ biographies believing that people ‘construct experiences of situations and transform them into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions and the senses, and integrate the outcomes into their own biographies’. Usher et al (2002, p88) argue that ‘experience can be invested with a multiplicity of meanings, identity conducted through many possible stories’. For Usher et al the ‘meaning of experience is never fixed...the text of experience is always open to reinterpretation’.

The situated contextual orientations to experiential learning of Boud and Walker (2002) and Usher et al (2002) offer an understanding of the importance of the contexts in which learning take place and are important for this study. Boud and Walker (2002, p97) suggest the 'taken for granted' features of local contexts can exert a 'profound influence over who we are, what and how we think and what we regard as legitimate knowledge'. For teachers the context can influence how they handle teaching/learning situations, the assumptions they hold about adult learners and how these assumptions might be transmitted in practice. Context can influence learners 'in terms of what they aspire to and how their expectations are framed...what are accepted as legitimate goals and what outcomes are valued over others...what processes are acceptable in any given situation' (Boud and Walker, 2002, p97, 98).

Illeris (2007, p84) argues that in adult education experiential learning is generally related to the 'recognition and application of students' prior informal learning' and that experiential learning is viewed as 'in some sort of opposition to what might be called school learning or learning from being taught'. A key focus in this study is that of exploring how different knowledges are given legitimation in the adult learner curriculum. This study will examine the extent to which adult learners' experiential knowledge is privileged or de-privileged in the practices in the curriculum and its legitimacy in accessing more privileged forms of capital, for example, the cultural capital of knowledge recognised and valued in higher education.

Transformative learning

Mezirow (2006, p92) puts forward a theory of transformative learning which is defined as 'the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumptions – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and able to change'. For Mezirow transformative learning is the 'process by which adults learn how to think critically for themselves rather than take assumptions supporting a point of view for granted' (Mezirow, 2006, p103). Mezirow is concerned with how adult learners make sense of their life experience and transformative learning is about the 'process of using a prior interpretation to construe an new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (Mezirow, 2000 cited in Merriam et al, 2007, p132). As Zoino-Jeannetti (2006, p28) notes 'personal reflection and interpretation of events, which subsequently involve personally and socially transforming action, are inherent in Mezirow's understanding of an adult's experience of learning'.

Situated learning

Wenger (2009, p210) argues for a social theory of learning as social participation where learning is placed 'in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world'. For Wenger participation refers to being active 'in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities'. Lave and Wenger (1991, p29) nominate the central defining characteristic of learning as a situated activity as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. They consider this to be the process through which newcomers become part of a community of practice through activities and the mastery of the necessary skills, knowledges and practices. Members of communities of practice are involved in

sets of relationships over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p98). According to Wenger (2009, p211) a social theory of learning needs to integrate the following components – learning as experience, learning as doing, learning as belonging and learning as becoming.

The perspectives of both Mezirow and Wenger offer an important focus for this study particularly in relation to the co-construction of adult learner identity. The study will explore the ways in which adult learners come to learn to fit in and learn who and how to be through the social learning practices in the return to education curriculum. Learning to fit in involves learning the social and academic practices necessary in order to take on a new identity as adult student in order to make sense of the new and unfamiliar community within which adult learners find themselves. For example, James et al (2007, p86) suggest that this learning of practices involves ‘the kinds of change, shaping, development or socialisation that people undergo in a learning culture. This encompasses the smallest through to the biggest of changes and includes learning to be something or someone, and learning to become something or someone’.

The study will examine the ways in which adult learners come to learn and acquire these practices and the impact of this on their new and emergent identities as well as their existing identities. Wenger (2009, p212) observes that irrespective of various influences in educational institutions such as curriculum, for example, that the learning that emerges as ‘the most personally transformative’ is that learning involving memberships of different communities of practice within the institution.

Training and efficiency in learning

In this perspective knowledge to be acquired is in the form of 'pre-defined knowledge or skills, couched in terms of objectives (often behavioural in nature) and learned in a planned and efficient way' (Usher et al, 2002, p79). The approach appears to promote learner autonomy with learners working at their own pace towards clear measurable goals but, as Usher et al observe, because the 'knowledge and skills are predefined' the learning thus becomes 'a neutral process or system removed from the influence of socio-cultural factors'. Likewise Ecclestone (1999, p37) argues that 'the design and positivist assumptions of outcome-based assessment can, even in the most imaginative teacher's hands, reduce student-centredness to a technical choice about what to do and in what order'. This perspective has importance for this study in relation to the nature and types of assessment methods used and also in relation to the support practices

Andragogy

Knowles's (1978, 1980, 1984) andragogy model is based on a perspective that differentiates between the characteristics of adult learners and younger learners and views adults as self-directed learners drawing on their experiences as a resource for learning. However andragogy can be criticised for its focus on the individual learner, its failure to acknowledge the importance of the social and cultural aspects of learning and for seeing adult learners as a homogenous group and, as Buchler et al (2007, p131) observe, andragogy has been 'eclipsed' by other theories that place greater emphasis on both context and on the socially constructed nature of learning.

Although St Clair (2004, p85) suggests that the concept of andragogy is useful for helping learners conceptualise the 'good' learner as it requires them to build a model of the 'competencies or characteristics required to achieve a given ideal model of performance', this process is seen by Knowles to occur in linear fashion thus ignoring both the collective influence and structural influences. In contrast, St Clair's concept of the aspirational myth of adult learner identity is one of a co-construction influenced by others, by the educational institution and by the social practices within which adult learners are situated and I take up this interpretation in this study.

Nevertheless the concept of the self-directed adult learner raises questions for this study as to how it could be perceived to underpin expectations of adult learners and consequently the nature and type of supports offered. If adult learners are seen as self-directed learners then they could be constructed as less in need and desiring of support which would in turn impact on the practices within the return to education curriculum. A key remit of vocational education is the facilitation and development of learners' autonomy and self-direction through the development of core skills such as 'taking responsibility for one's own learning and progress' and 'reflecting on and evaluating quality of own learning and achievement' which are seen to underpin the discourse of FETAC vocational education and training. This study examines the underpinning construction of the adult learner in both course planning and development and in the practices of the adult learner curriculum and considers the impact of this construction on subsequent expectations and types of support offered.

The social theories of learning discussed in this section place emphasis on the importance of context, experience and learners' biographies to learning and the construction of identity in relation to memberships of new learning communities. With this in mind, a key aim in this study is to attain a much clearer picture of the diverse (and sometimes conflicting) expectations implicit in the adult learner curriculum and in the educational and social processes and practices in the college. The tension between support for and expectations of adult learners is also evident in some of the empirical research. In this final section of this review I draw on selected studies to interrogate the tension in the interrelationship between support and expectations in the adult learner curriculum.

Co-constructing practices - the tension between support and expectations

Many of the empirical studies on mature students returning to formal education be it further education, Access programmes or higher education emphasise the necessity for support systems in institutions to enable adult learners make the transition into a new and unfamiliar learning environment (Bamber et al, 1997; Bamber and Tett, 1999, 2000; Britton and Baxter, 1999; Bowl, 2003; Gallacher et al, 2002; Tett, 2004; Keane, 2006). Many also highlight the disjuncture between the different 'literacies' and habituses of adult learners and the institutional habitus of educational institutions (Lawrence, 2003, 2005; Murphy and Fleming, 1998, 2000; Thomas, 2002a, 2002b; Bufton, 2006). As Bamber and Tett (2000, p60; 2004, p61) note 'universities must also accept that access to non-traditional students does not end at the point of entry. Account needs to be taken of necessary changes in assessment, curriculum and student support'.

One of the most significant findings in Bamber et al's (1997, p19) research into the LAST⁴ project was the need for educators to build 'supportive structures as part of a course culture'. Participants in the LAST project were given a range of supports such as personal, academic and financial and the group had a 'positive culture of mutual support' (Tett, 2004, p258). Within the curriculum and their teaching practices staff tried to take cognisance of the influence the wide range of factors 'such as poverty, home, work and community' that can impact on learning. This is reflective of Boud and Walker's (2002, p97) definition of context as encompassing the 'cultural, social and political environment' where reflection and learning take place. However other studies do not show evidence of such a paradigmatic shift in institutional attitudes. Macdonald and Stratta (2001) explored tutors' responses to non-traditional students in a higher education setting with a 'well established access policy'. They found that tutors' responses largely seemed to be underpinned by a view of the student as 'someone for whom learning is their own business' and that non-traditional students should integrate into the culture of the institution. Such a view is indicative of a self-directed and autonomous adult learner. However, as Merriam (1998, p56) notes, while much of the theoretical literature in adult education puts forward a view of learners being self-directed and in control of their learning, data from empirical studies often reveals that many adult learners do not either know how or want to take control of their learning.

The study by Avis et al (2002) quoted earlier in this chapter explored constructions of learners within three differing aspects of post-compulsory

⁴ The LAST project was set up in 1995 to 'enable academically unqualified activists from working-class communities, disabled people and minority ethnic groups' to gain the BA in Community Education from an elite institution (Bamber and Tett, 1999, 467)

education in England and related these to the post-compulsory education policy context. Avis et al (2002, p40) note that while the official discourse of GNVQ emphasised the importance of learners' responsibility in taking control of their learning the reality can be quite different. Their findings showed that learners were perceived by lecturers to be less confident and less motivated because of previous educational experiences and that 'rather than being capable of taking responsibility for their own learning, they were perceived as needing a considerable amount of help and support to enable them to succeed'.

These studies all have relevance to this research. Although the studies by Bamber et al, Tett and Macdonald and Stratta relate to higher education they show how different institutional habituses work to either recognise or ignore the need for additional supports for adult learners in order to help them become part of the culture of the institution and thereby open up access to greater forms of capital. All three studies show how the provision of support (or lack of it) is predicated on a particular expectation of adult learners. The work of Avis et al (2002) is significant because of the parallels of the GNVQ discourse with that of FETAC where learners' responsibility for their own learning and the development of core skills are emphasised pointing again to the construction of the self-directed learner.

McInnis (2002, p36-37) summarises the four 'learning climates' identified by Little (1975) in his study of university learning climates. Drawing on the idea of family climates and student styles Little suggested that the learning climates - neglecting, indulging, training and cultivating - are the product of two dimensions, support and orientation. Support refers to reassurance and

recognition given to students and orientation is the both the guidance they receive and the demands placed on them to perform (McInnis, 2002, p36). A neglecting climate is one where 'demands are low and support is low'. According to McInnis this can 'create the illusion of developing autonomy' but such a climate is more likely to lead to minimal achievement and withdrawal from learning. In the indulging climate, demands are low and performance is hardly stressed at all, but 'reassurance and recognition of the person' is strong. However the outcome is one of learner dependence. A training climate is one where 'guidance and demands are high but the importance attached to student self-knowledge is low'. The training climate fosters a 'dutiful' student (Little, 1975) cited in McInnis (2002, p37) and the focus is on performance and results. Finally, the cultivating climate attaches a high importance to both demands and performance but also to support and student self-knowledge and awareness. In the cultivating climate, both support for and expectations of learners are high.

James and Biesta et al (2007) use the concept of learning culture to refer to the 'particular ways in which the interactions between many different factors shape students' learning opportunities and practices'. In a longitudinal study of learning cultures in FE they suggest that different learning cultures 'enable or disable different possibilities for the people that come into contact with them...a learning culture will permit, promote, inhibit or rule out certain kinds of learning'. The studies of both McInnis and James and Biesta et al have particular significance in the light of my research because of my concern with the tensions that exist between the levels and types of care and support given to adult learners and the notions of what constitute empowering and

disempowering practices in the derivation, enactment and experience of the adult learner curriculum.

Chapter summary

In the opening chapter I argued that the return to education course is predicated on desired aspirational behaviours and that these desired behaviours are co-constructed through the educational processes and practices of the institution via the adult learner curriculum. The review of the theoretical and empirical literature informing this study has helped to both illuminate and problematise key issues and questions relating to this research study.

In the first section of this chapter I explicated Bourdieu's tools of capital, habitus and field and St Clair's (2004) conceptualisation of the aspirational myth as the theoretical framework for this study. This framework is valuable because of the explanatory power of these concepts when applied to the field of the return to education curriculum to analyse the practices through which the aspirational myth of adult learner identity and aspirational behaviours are constructed and the ways in which social, cultural and symbolic capitals are accessed and legitimated through the interactions of learners' habituses and capitals and the institutional habitus of the course and the college.

Drawing on this analytical framework I examined theoretical and empirical literature relating to adult learners' identity and subject positioning. As a result of this I want to explore the ways in which adult learners and the course team construct the adult learner identity and how this construction impacts on the practices in the adult learner curriculum. I will do this through analysis of

documentary data and through exploring the experiences of adult learners, tutors and managers through semi-structured interviews.

I then considered the question of the validity, legitimacy and privileging of different knowledges in the adult learner curriculum. From this I concluded that my analysis of the adult learner curriculum should be framed by questions about the types of knowledge that are given privilege and legitimacy in the curriculum, the ways this is done and who regulates this legitimation. Using the literature on assessment I explored the ways in which adult learners can be facilitated or denied access to greater and more privileged forms of capital. In the empirical research I will look at the different types of capital offered to adult learners and the ways in which these capitals are facilitated or denied and regulated through the processes of assessment and accreditation. Finally I explored theories of adult learning and I highlighted some of the tensions surrounding expectations and support in the curriculum. In this study I want to examine the different support practices and the ways that they are perceived by learners, tutors and managers. The questions and issues raised in this chapter will again be interrogated in the light of the exploration of the data and the discussion of the findings. Before this however it is necessary to offer a discussion of the methodological stance and the research methods that have informed this study. I turn my attention to this in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

...studies of identity explore the ways in which the social, personal and cultural meet, the subsequent ways in which people are 'stitched into' social relations, how identities are made within this psycho-social nexus and the possible actions that flow from understanding one's place in a system of social relations

Wetherall (2005) cited in Ecclestone (2007b, p122)

Introduction

One of my main objectives as a researcher is to maintain 'philosophical, theoretical, ontological and epistemological coherence' (Wellington et al, 2005, p98) throughout all stages of the research process. Dunne, Pryor and Yates⁵ (2005, p12) state that 'research in social settings is often recursive...in understanding what is happening we need to take into consideration contexts wider than the immediate social action in which we are participating'. Wellington et al (2005, p96) observe that 'people taking part in research situations, whether as researchers or research 'subjects', make their own interpretations of those situations and this affects how they behave in them'.

In this chapter I set out to provide the rationale, discussion and critique of the methodology and methods that I employed in this research. The chapter is organised into five main sections. In the first section I briefly revisit the aim of the research while the second section discusses the research methodologies using the extant literature. Research methods, the processes of data collection and data management are then discussed. The next section provides a

⁵ Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005, p3) refer to the way in which the chapters in their book are authored by all three writers with interchangeable use of 'I' and 'we' and they specifically request that 'you do not reduce us to 'et al.' in citing the book'. I am therefore adhering to this appeal in my referencing of this book in the text of the thesis

discussion of analysis of the data and the final section discusses rigour and ethical considerations within the study.

Aim of the research

The aim of the research is to examine the ways in which adult learners come to know their place and learn who or how to be when they return to formal education. The study explores the specific practices in the adult learner curriculum through which the conceptualisation of what it means to be an adult learner is co-constructed and transmitted. By exploring the impact of implicit tensions in the adult learner curriculum (such as the validity and legitimacy of knowledge, the tension between support and expectations and the broader purpose and nature of the return to education course) on social and academic practices in the curriculum, I hope to gain a better understanding of the programmes on offer to adult learners in order to maximise the educational choices and types of capital (cultural, social, symbolic) available to learners.

Interpretive framework

This research is located within an interpretive framework and employs a qualitative case study design and approach. Merriam (1998, p6) states that 'qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of the world and the experiences they have in the world'. Social events and behaviours can only be interpreted and constructed by the person who is describing their experiences of them. There are different meanings for different situations. The stance I take is that *how* or *what* behaviour or reality 'is' depends on our construction of it and the conceptualisation of identity in this study is that it is influenced and shaped

through interactions and social encounters with others. This approach acknowledges that people experience and construct their own different realities and what they perceive to be real for them in their world. Identity is neither fixed nor static but rather something that is fluid and changing. In this research process I did not set out with a pre-given hypothesis to test and prove. Rather, as noted by Merriam (1998, p28, 29), I was interested in 'insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing'.

Research methodologies

Methodology refers to 'the choices we make about cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis etc in planning and executing a research study' (Silverman, 2005, p99). In the study I wanted to explore the specific practices within the adult learner curriculum through which adult learners come to know their place and fit in when returning to education. Yates (2004, p138) states that qualitative work attempts to 'explore how individuals or group members give meaning to and express their understanding of themselves, their experiences and/or their worlds'.

There are two main reasons why I chose to focus on the adult learner curriculum within my own college as the case study. My primary reason was to gain a greater understanding of the educational and social practices in the adult learner curriculum with a view to evaluating and improving practice, both my own and that within the course team, and secondly, as course director I had greater access to course participants, tutors and documentation than I would have had in another college. The latter reason is not unproblematic and I consider the issues and tensions concerning insider research later in this

chapter. Because I was interested in the experiences of adult learners and sought to gain understanding of our educational processes and practices with adult learners I chose to use interviews to obtain the rich data of participants' experiences that I felt could not be captured using a questionnaire for example. I used a thematic documentary analysis (course planning documents, FETAC curricular materials, college promotional literature, textbooks and college assessment material) to search for patterns and themes in order to explore the ways in which the adult learner identity was constructed and how different knowledges and access to capitals were given significance and legitimation in the planning and development of the course. The conceptual framework for the study afforded key sensitising concepts that allowed me employ a thematic analysis of the documentary and interview data. Using thematic analysis enabled me to search across the data sets firstly for patterns, secondly to code the data according to the patterns established and thirdly to group related patterns into themes and sub-themes for analysis and interpretation thus giving greater access to and affording greater understanding of respondents' lived experiences.

Qualitative case study

A case study can offer 'a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon' and therefore is particularly useful when applied to fields of study such as education because 'educational processes, problems and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and maybe even improve practice' (Merriam, 1998, p41). She suggests that case studies have three main functional orientations - descriptive, interpretive and evaluative (Merriam, 1998, p38). This study incorporates all three of these elements. It is descriptive in

that it aims to provide a thick description of the processes and practices of the adult learner curriculum by drawing on the accounts and experiences of learners, tutors and managers in the interviews and on the documentary data relating to course and curriculum development. It is interpretive in that by aiming 'to gather as much information about the problem as possible' (Merriam, 1998, p39) I hope to be able to explain and interpret the ways in which the aspirational myth of the adult learner is co-constructed through the practices in this particular adult learner curriculum and the implications of this construction for support practices in the course. Finally it is evaluative in the sense that exploring the practices within the curriculum and exposing their inherent tensions will lead to a greater clarity and understanding of the dynamics of the adult learner curriculum and point to the implications for future practice.

Hayes (2006, p13) suggests the case study approach can be used to 'inform practitioners about a single case as a way of understanding others (that is, generalisation) thereby helping to improve practice and forge close links between the academic and the practical'. Given that the aim of study is to explore the practices within the adult learner curriculum with a view to a greater understanding of the ways adult learners come to know their place thus affording a greater understanding our programmes for adult learners a qualitative case study is therefore the approach that best lends itself to this type of study.

Reflexivity

Etherington (2004, p101) observes 'in qualitative research, reflexivity is an inherent part of the process...while interviewing, analysing and writing,

awareness of our own presence in the research can enhance the process and outcomes'. Thus reflexivity is concerned with the relationship of the researcher to that which is being researched and involves a constant awareness of the effects of the presence and the positioning of the researcher on the research subject and participants.

Positioning myself as researcher

Reflection on my own subject positioning as a white, middle class, educated woman is important for this study. The adult learners in this study know a lot less about me than I know about them and my educational and career trajectory is very different to theirs. For example, in my information and consent letter for learners (Appendix 1) I did not disclose that I was doing research for a doctoral degree because I was concerned that it might lead to feelings of insecurity and inferiority particularly for learners whose experiences of education have been nothing like mine. However another interpretation of my feelings could be that I *assumed* these feelings would be evoked in learners when I have really no way of knowing this *and*, more uncomfortably, through this making an assumption about my own perceived superiority.

'Insider' research

I used the research journal to reflect on dilemmas and issues arising throughout the research journey. One such issue was that of being an 'insider' researcher in my own institution. Knatz (1988) quoted in Ely (1991, p16) argues that the setting that is 'too familiar can be particularly 'loaded' and can place us in role conflicts that can be almost unbearable'. Coghlan and Brannick (2005, p61-62) caution that while insider-researcher have access to valuable knowledge about

the 'culture and informal structures' of an organisation the disadvantage is that of being potentially too close to the data. For example, I noted earlier that this study arose from a sense of unease about certain issues in the adult learner curriculum. Although I was keen to investigate these I was also concerned about what might be interpreted as defensiveness or a reluctance to scrutinise the course too closely. Overall I was proud of the course and its ethos and supportive practices towards adult learners. However I was afraid that the interviews with learners and tutors might reveal deeper flaws in the course that I was unaware of or others that I did not want to acknowledge because of being too closely involved in it. This led me to worry that I might be defensive in the interviews so I had to be very careful to ensure during the interviews that I did not let this happen and that I did not try to 'lead' or control the direction of the interview.

Ferguson and Ferguson (2001) cited in Coghlan and Brannick (2005, p62) note that it is important for insider-researchers to be open to disconfirming evidence, even to actively seek it through interviews. I did this by ensuring that questions were not leading and by ensuring that I followed up interview answers with interventions and probes if they did provide disconfirming evidence and by reporting instances where findings were not supported by the data or challenged the literature. For Coghlan and Brannick (2005, p62) 'epistemic reflexivity is the constant analysis of your lived experiences as well as your own theoretical and methodological presuppositions'.

The inequity of power in the relationship in the interview situation also concerned me. As Bogden (1982) cited in Ely (1991, p58) note, an interview is

a 'purposeful conversation' that is usually steered by one person. I was conscious that my relationship with learners as their course director/teacher could be influenced by my role as researcher in asking them to talk with me about aspects of their lives and of the course. I was mindful that some participants might feel that they 'had' to agree to the interview and also that interviewees would worry that their interview answers were not the 'right' answers or not what they thought I wanted to hear. I tried to redress these issues by conducting the interviews in a classroom rather than in my shared office space, by assuring interviewees of confidentiality and anonymity and by emphasising that there was no correct answer to the questions and that what I was most interested in was their stories and their accounts.

Conducting the research

Gaining access

In order to focus the research on the return to education course within my own college and to be able to consult documentation and conduct interviews with adult learners, tutors and managers I firstly had to negotiate access to the setting. In keeping with ethical standards in research I approached senior management to obtain permission to carry out the study in the college. I wrote a letter (Appendix 2) detailing the scope of the research and requesting permission to conduct the research study and to gain access to relevant documentation in the college. I obtained written signed permission from senior management.

Methods of data collection

The primary sources of data were documentary data in the form of course planning materials, college promotional literature and official FETAC curriculum and assessment documents and interview data from semi-structured individual interviews with learners, tutors and manager and focus group interviews. Table 3.1 summarises the methods of data collection used in this study.

<i>Type of data</i>	<i>Time frame involved</i>	<i>Profile</i>	<i>Additional information and/or comments</i>
Documentary data	Gathered mostly in the early stages of data collection. However some course planning material was not available until the later stages due to issues around access	College promotional literature (e.g. prospectus, flyers for the course FETAC modules and assessment literature Course planning material outlining aims, objectives and rationale for the course and tracing curriculum development	The documentary data were analysed to explore the different constructions of the 'adult learner' across the Different texts and the ways in which different knowledges were given legitimisation. Course planning texts were analysed to trace the development of the course and the influences and interests represented in the curriculum
Semi-structured individual interviews	Seventeen interviews lasting from 45 minutes to one hour and ten minutes. The interviews were conducted over a three month period	Interviews conducted with current and graduate learners; course tutors and senior management	In order to protect anonymity all respondents have been assigned a label – e.g. R1, R2 etc
Focus group interviews	Two focus group interviews both of which lasted for over an hour	Six students just coming to the end of their first year participated in the first focus group interview Six second year students participated in the focus group interview	The purpose of the focus group interview was to centre a group discussion around some of the key questions in the interview schedule. I felt that the focus group Interview could facilitate a different exploration of these questions in a group discussion because of the diversity of opinion and interpretation in a group setting

<i>Type of data</i>	<i>Time frame involved</i>	<i>Profile</i>	<i>Additional information and/or comments</i>
Research journal	The research journal was kept from the beginning of the research process right through to the end		<p>The journal was used to provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A description of the research journey detailing both the highs and lows of the process, reflection on the research process • Reflection on dilemmas and issues occurring during the research journey • Analytical notes and reflections on data collection reflective post-interview notes; details of references – books, journal articles and future reading

Table 3.1

Sample

I conducted seventeen individual interviews with learners, graduates, tutors and managers and two focus group interviews with students. Merriam (1998, p64) notes that qualitative case studies require two levels of sampling. The first level is where the case to be studied is selected and the second level is where sampling within the case occurs. In this study the case being studied is the return to education course. The sample within the case was wider than that in St Clair’s (2004) study of the aspirational myth (as he did not interview course participants) and was a purposive sample. Purposive sampling is ‘based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned’ (Merriam, 1998, p61). In this study I originally set out to conduct interviews with current adult learners, tutors and managers. As I conducted the initial interviews with learners I then felt including a wider range of adult learners’ experiences would afford a greater understanding of the aspirational myth so I

decided to interview learners who had progressed from the course into either further/higher education or employment. Figure 3.1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the sample for the semi-structured interviews.

Sample for individual interviews

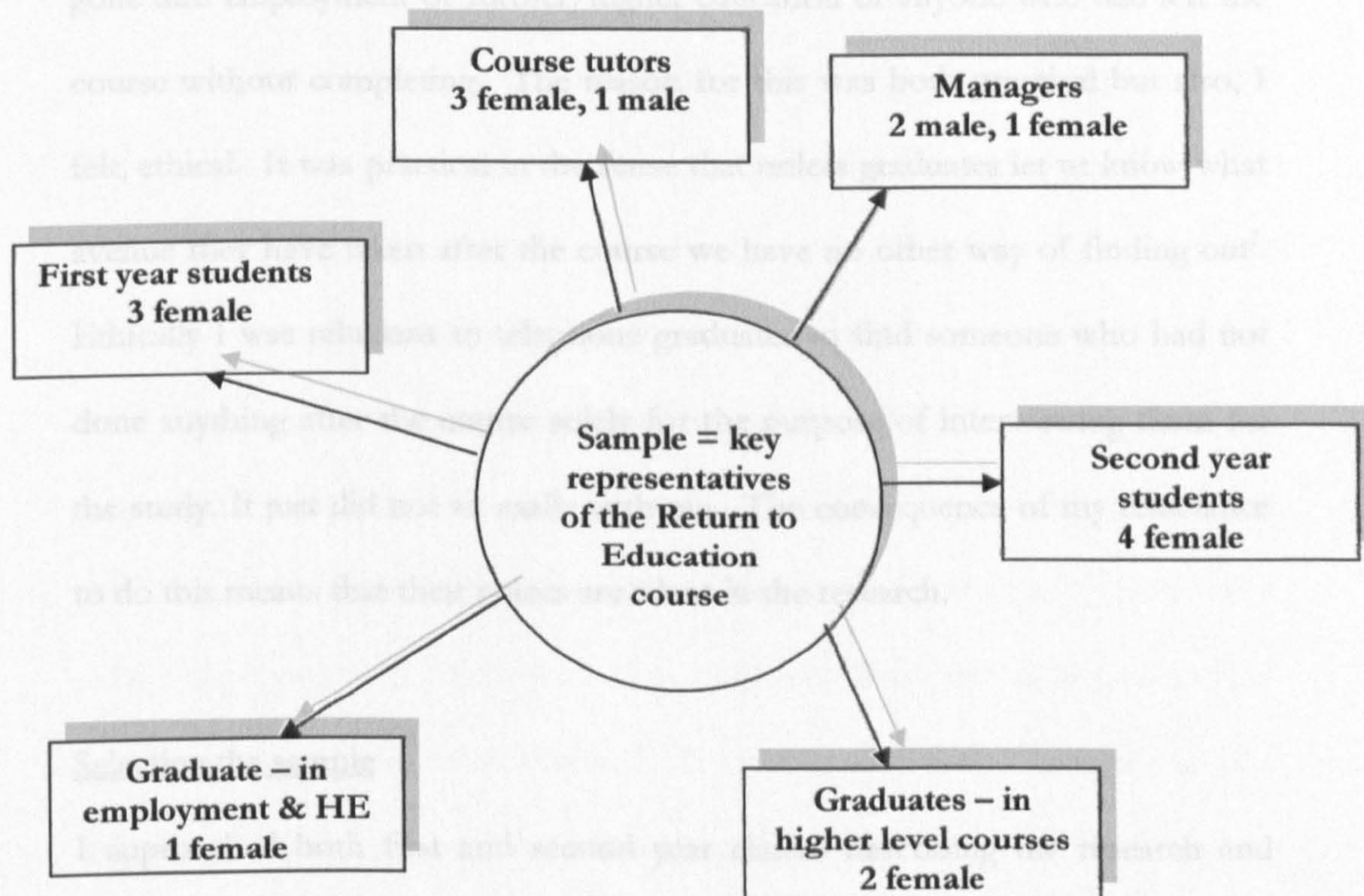


Figure 3.1

Figure 3.1 shows how the sample for the semi-structured individual interviews is representative of all the different actors in the college involved in the course. In choosing the sample I wanted to gain data from the widest possible range of sources. However there are voices that are not represented in the study. Firstly due to the low numbers of male participants⁶ in the course male voices were always going to be in the minority. In the event I was not able to interview any male learners. Although I had made an arrangement to interview one first year

⁶ There were two male students in first year and none in the second year group

male learner, his personal circumstances at the time and afterwards meant that the interview could not take place and no follow-up was arranged. Therefore the study lacks the voices of male adult learners and the different perspectives that might have been offered on the aspirational myth of the adult learner. Secondly I did not interview anyone who had completed the course but not gone into employment or further/higher education or anyone who had left the course without completing. The reason for this was both practical but also, I felt, ethical. It was practical in the sense that unless graduates let us know what avenue they have taken after the course we have no other way of finding out⁷. Ethically I was reluctant to telephone graduates to find someone who had not done anything after the course solely for the purpose of interviewing them for the study. It just did not sit easily with me. The consequence of my reluctance to do this means that their voices are silent in the research.

Selecting the sample

I approached both first and second year classes describing the research and explaining the interview process and the procedures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Six first year students and four second years agreed to participate in individual interviews. The relatively low numbers are reflective of attendances in class on that particular day. I arranged to conduct the interviews in the post-examination period as I thought that the students would be free of the pressures of exams. However this proved to be more of a complication rather than an advantage because students were no longer in the college and it proved difficult at times to set up interviews. During this time frame I interviewed three first-year and four second-year students. Of the remaining

⁷ This year an exit survey will be carried out at the graduation to provide a profile of the progression routes for all those graduating in 2008

first year students, one decided against participation, another left the course and the third did not arrive for the interview at the appointed time. I tried to make contact to rearrange the interview but was unable to do so. I decided not to pursue it as I did not want to create any additional pressure for learners and I was conscious of intruding on people's time and goodwill.

My reasons for selecting the four tutors interviewed was because they taught on both the return to education course and on other courses in the college and therefore would have experience of teaching both younger and mature adult students. It would have been useful to interview a tutor new to the course and the college for a newcomer's perspective regarding the aspirational myth, the institutional habitus and the practices within the adult learner curriculum but at the time of interviewing the course team had remained consistent with no new tutors appointed. I interviewed two graduates from the course who had progressed to a higher level course in the college and I also interviewed one graduate from the course who had taken up employment and was about to enter higher education. I then interviewed three managers one of whom had been particularly involved in course design and development from the very beginning.

Sample for focus group interviews

I asked each of the class groups if they were agreeable to participate in a focus group interview to be conducted during my own class time and in the learners' base classroom thus ensuring no disruption to their classes and a familiar location for them. I explained the research and the focus group interview process and that the interview would be digitally recorded. I emphasised

participants' guaranteed anonymity and right to withdraw at any stage from the process. On the actual day of the interviews attendance in class was the deciding factor for the numbers participating and on each occasion six students were present in class. As with the individual interviews all the participants in both the first-year focus group and the second-year group were female.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews offer the opportunity to obtain rich data about participants' lived experiences and 'to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed' (McCormack Steinmetz, 1991) cited in Ely et al (1991, p58). In the study I wanted to explore the ways in which adult learners coming back to education construct and re-construct their identities in order to learn 'who to be' and 'how to fit in'. I was interested in their subjective accounts and experience of their social worlds and therefore the methods I chose to explore these were those that 'engage with, talk to and question and explore the experiences' of the participants (Wellington et al, 2005, p102). Interviews proved to be the best way of obtaining the types of thick descriptive data that I was looking for.

Focus group interviews

I carried out two focus group interviews in addition to individual interviews. Wilkinson (2004, p180) notes that in group interviews respondents 'react and build upon the responses of other group members'. Because of the types of agreement, disagreement, contradiction, elaboration and development of accounts between group members I felt that a group interview would yield rich data that might not necessarily emerge in a one-to-one interview. Wilkinson

(2004, p180) suggests that because focus group interviews are closer 'to everyday conversation' they are more 'naturalistic' than interviews'. However their limitations include the possibility of domination of the group by stronger, more opinionated members and also the difficulties of trying to identify respondents on the tape unless you know the participants very well or you ensure that people identify themselves before speaking.

Wengraf's conceptual framework

Wengraf's (2001) conceptual framework proved to be a useful tool for devising interview questions. Figure 3.2 replicates the algorithm devised by Wengraf. He emphasises the pre-eminence of the research questions and notes the importance of distinguishing between the 'theory-language' used in research questions and the 'interview-language' used in interview questions and interview interventions emphasising that interview questions must be formulated in the language of the interviewee.

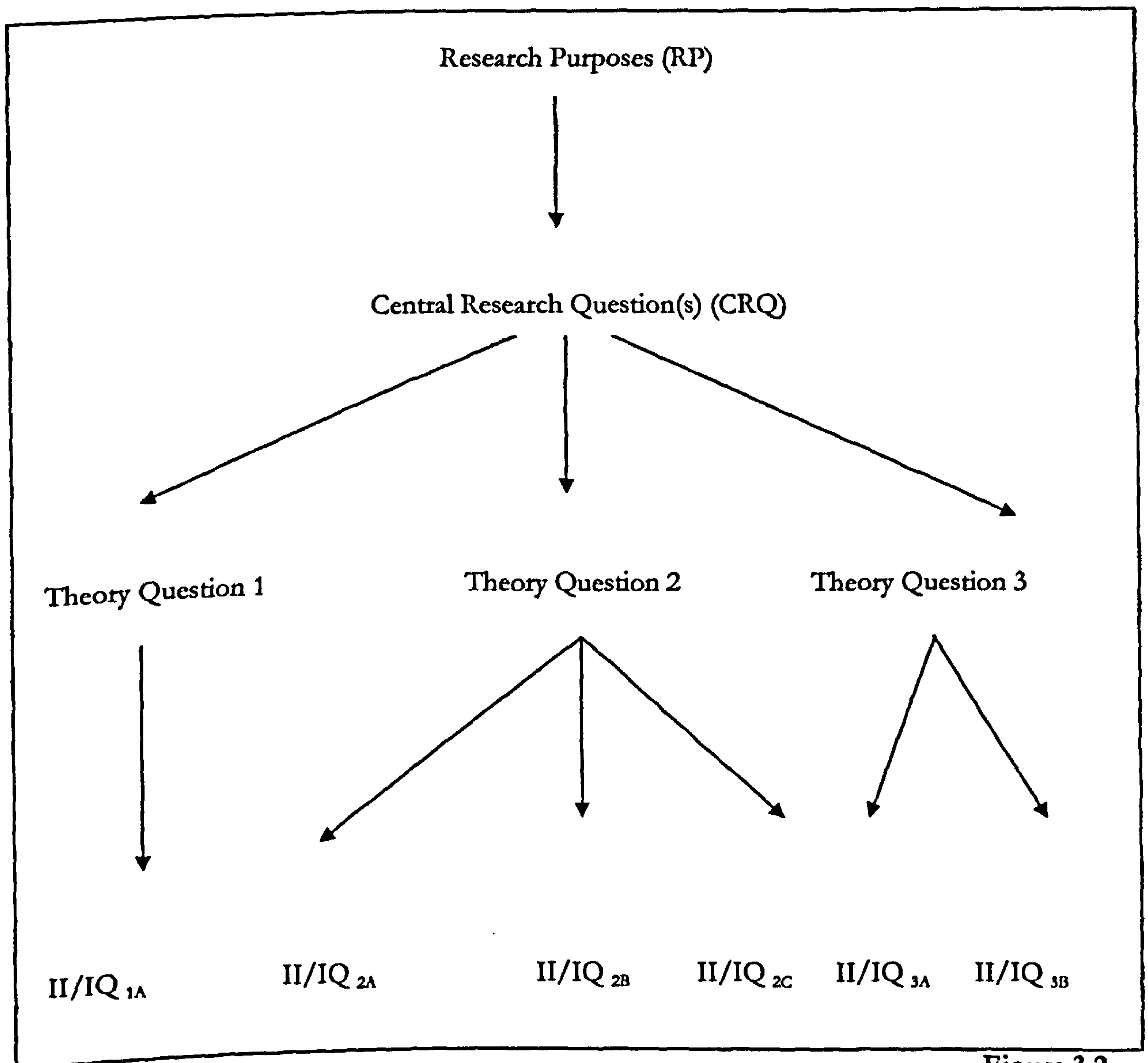


Figure 3.2

In Wengraf's framework the central research question (CRQ) gives rise to the theory questions (TQ). The theory questions give rise to the interview questions (IQ) and the interview interventions (II). In this study the theory questions are the four subsidiary questions emanating from the overarching research question. I used Wengraf's framework in the following way. For example, the central research question (CRQ) asks what are the desired aspirational behaviours that an adult learner needs to learn/acquire in order to fit in and through which practices are these behaviours co-constructed. From this theory question 1 (TQ1) asks:

In what ways does the notion of the ‘aspirational myth’ of the adult learner impact on the construction of adult learners’ identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme?

The interview questions (IQs) derived from each of the theory questions form the schedule of questions for the interview (Appendix 3). For example in my interviews for adult learners IQ5 asked learners ‘what do you think is expected of you as an adult learner coming back to education?’ and IQ9 asks ‘what does being an adult learner coming back to formal education mean to you? (with the following interview interventions (IIs) noted in red font to myself – ‘in what ways do you think of yourself as an adult learner? How does it make you feel? What changes (if any) have you experienced within yourself?). I found that interview interventions from early interviews were useful in helping reformulate some of the interview questions for subsequent interviews as they highlighted issues that needed clarification for different respondents.

Dillon (1990) cited in Wengraf (2001, p199 - 200) notes that interview interventions can sometimes be more appropriate than coming in with another question. For example, these can simply be a statement by the researcher in response to the respondent’s answer; asking a participant to elaborate a particular point; a signal to the respondent that they are being understood and finally maintaining an appreciative silence. It is essential that the types of questions asked and interventions used cannot be considered to be ‘leading’. For example, I was conscious at times of having to draw a respondent back to the question when they were going off on an unrelated tangent and I tried to be very careful in the ways that I used these prompts. Respondents also asked on

several occasions if they were answering the question correctly. I reassured them that there was no 'right answer' and what I was interested in was their accounts and experiences in relation to the question under discussion. By paying careful attention to questions I asked, the ways in which I asked them and the types of interventions used I fully acknowledged that I was anything but a passive player in the interview process. This reflects Silverman's (1993) cited in Macdonald and Stratta (1998, p68) caution that interviews are 'sites for construction of individual and collective subjectivities, with the interviewer as a contributor to that construction'.

Ely et al (1991, p67) comment that 'what is essential in creating questions is that they are consonant with or arise from the ongoing data as the qualitative researcher contemplates them'. After each interview I made reflective notes in my research journal. Included in these notes were reflections on the ways in which respondents answered particular questions (indicating whether the wording of questions needed to be changed), recurring themes in the interviews, insights of respondents that needed to be incorporated into questions in future interviews and reflections on the ways in which I conducted the interviews so that I could make any necessary changes. For example, I found that when I was asking learners about the ethos or culture towards adult learners in the college (problematising the institutional habitus) I needed to use a variety of terms such as 'atmosphere'; 'feeling'; 'attitude' etc rather than ethos or culture in order to clarify for learners exactly what I wanted to find out. Merriam (1998, p88) observes that post-interview reflections 'allow the investigator to monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyse the information itself'.

Conducting the individual interviews

Altogether I carried out seventeen semi-structured interviews which were representative of as many people involved in the return to education course as possible (see Figure 3.1 previously). The interviews were all digitally recorded with the written consent of each individual participant. Each of the individual interviews lasted from between forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes.

Conducting the focus group interviews

The focus group interviews lasted for one hour and ten minutes and one hour fifteen minutes respectively and were digitally recorded with the written permission of respondents. Wilkinson (2004, p181) observes that because of the number of respondents involved in focus group interviews the researcher's control is inevitably reduced but I saw this as more of an opportunity to reduce the power dynamic between myself and the respondents. I also found that during the two focus group interviews I interjected very little other than moving through the questions and that interview interventions (probes, prompts etc) were often put forward by respondents rather than by me.

Data analysis

In this section I provide first of all a discussion of the analysis of the documentary data and then of the data from the semi-structured interviews.

Analysis of the documentary data

In this study I used a range of documentary data for analysis of the specified adult learner curriculum. The texts included course planning material, college

promotional literature (prospectus, flyer etc) and official FETAC curriculum documentation including reports and module descriptors. Informed by the conceptual tools of capital and habitus and by the concept of the aspirational myth I used thematic analysis of the texts to show the ways in which the adult learner identity was constructed across the course planning and college texts, the different knowledges given legitimation in the official curriculum and the types of capital the return to education course seeks to offer adult learners.

The documentary data that I selected for analysis were those that I felt would provide the most information towards illuminating the key research questions. For example, a key concern in this study was to examine the ways in which the notion of an aspirational myth of the adult learner impacts on adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place. I therefore felt that it was important to explore the conceptualisations of the adult learner identity in the planning and development of the course so that I could interrogate the extent to which these constructions impacted on processes and practices in the adult learner curriculum which would be explored in the semi-structured interviews. Likewise I wanted to explore the types of knowledge given legitimacy in the planning and development of the course and then examine the ways in which different knowledges were afforded significance in the practices within the curriculum.

To investigate these I analysed initial course planning material (reports, memos, discussion documents and curriculum plans) and college promotional material drawing on the following guiding questions for my analysis (Table 3.2). The

questions were informed by the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and St Clair, the research questions and from the critical reading of the extant literature.

<i>Questions guiding the analysis of the documentary data</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who do we think they are? What different constructions of the adult learner identity are evident in the documentary data?• Dissonance and congruence between adult learners' habituses and the institutional habitus?• What is deemed legitimate and valid knowledge and who decides?• How are certain subjects selected over others? What guides the selection process? Whose interests are represented?• To what extent is learners' knowledge used, valued, drawn on, re-constructed, subjugated in curriculum development?• Involvement (or lack) of learners in curriculum planning?• What currency does accreditation hold?• How can capitals be built upon, what capitals are valued – progression routes• Learning to become 'whom' or 'what'? – currency of work experience• What forms of social networks and social capitals are available for adult learners to access?

Table 3.2

In the initial stages for the documentary data I found it easier to work through the paper based documents using different highlighters and making notes for the initial coding and development of main themes and sub-themes and I created a grid on paper to record and group the themes and link the related data sources. However I then created memos within NVivo 7 linking common themes across data sources (e.g. interviews and documentary sources) so in this way I employed NVivo 7 for some of the analysis of the documentary data.

The findings from the analysis of the documentary data then provided me with further questions to explore in the semi-structured interviews and these questions are detailed in Chapter 4.

Analysis of the interview data

Transcription

I transcribed all the interviews myself and while the process was hugely time-consuming and generated a vast corpus of data by virtue of the quantity and duration of the interviews, I still felt that engaging with the data in its very raw state rather than working from someone else's transcriptions allowed me to stay very close to the data. Etherington (2004, p78) observes that the processes of audio taping and transcription are not generally acknowledged in research reports. She notes that 'as we listen to and transcribe audiotapes of interviews/conversations, we will almost certainly be analysing the data and making choices based upon the theories that we hold'.

First phase of data analysis

After each interview I made detailed field notes in the research journal with reflective notes/questions which allowed me to reflect not only on the process of the interview but also on questions requiring greater clarity for respondents in relation to terminology and focus. These reflections then fed into the next round of interviews. For example, this extract from my research journal highlights this need for clarification as became evident in the interview with R1.

Interview with R1: 05/04/06

Interviewee quite nervous at first and I think very conscious of wanting to give the right answer. She did check frequently as to whether or not she was getting the point – concerned about 'missing the point' of the question. This was particularly evident in relation to my questions about the ethos of the course towards adult learners and also around questions and the discussion about the messages we give to adult learners via this ethos. I reassured her that there was no 'right' answer and that what I was interested in was the different views and perceptions that respondents have regarding the ethos.

Her concerns are important in the light of the need to be careful about how I frame the questions concerning 'ethos'. The interview interventions and probes are important here but must be used carefully so that I don't 'lead' the interviewee.

This reflection on the interview with R1 led me to try to ensure greater clarity for subsequent interviews in relation to the questions concerning 'ethos' and as noted previously in the chapter this highlighted the necessity to be able to use alternative terms as interventions and prompts when exploring these questions.

Second phase of data analysis

Informed by a thematic analysis approach each interview transcript was annotated with preliminary patterns, issues and questions relating back to the key research questions. Thematic analysis involves 'searching *across* the data set - be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts - 'to find repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p86). Drawing on questions raised as a result of engaging with the key literature, the theoretical framework (Bourdieu and St Clair), the research questions and the interview questions Table 3.3 lists the questions used to guide this process of annotation and analysis.

Guiding questions for process of annotation and preliminary analysis

- What does the adult education environment and ethos look like in this college? Or what is the nature of the ethos?
- In what ways is the adult learner identity constructed by learners, tutors and managers?
- In what ways is this ethos (institutional habitus) experienced by learners, tutors and managers in this college?
- What are the different perceptions of the 'good adult learner' and in what ways do the conceptualisations of learners, tutors and managers differ?
- What expectations do tutors have of adult learners? How do learners find out what these are?
- In what ways do support practices foster autonomy and independent learning?
- In what ways do support practices foster adult learners' dependency?
- 'Who' or 'what' are we educating adult learners to be? What forms of legitimate capital can they access on the course (and with the course) and what kinds of currency might these capitals bring? What can learners do with this capital – what opportunities does it offer?
- How do adults returning to education in this college learn what's expected of them? How do they come to learn to fit in and 'play the game'?
- How do adult learners and tutors perceive 'college knowledge'?
- Why is gaining 'college knowledge' (both academic and social practices) important for adult learners?

Table 3.3

Table 3.4 and 3.5 display extracts from the annotated interview transcript from R1 and R10 which demonstrates how I began to analyse the data in the first cycle of data analysis. In the extract in Table 3.3 R1 is responding to the question about the particular ethos towards adult learners and the expectations

of adult learners in the college. R1's response raises the notion of the different constructions of adult learner identity tied up with issues such as motivation, goals and where learners are coming from and the comments attached to the highlighted development shows the preliminary development of the theme of the aspirational identity.

Factors dictating the type of co-construction? (does the aspirational myth differ for each student) – different constructions

I think that they would get very mixed messages about that. It depends ultimately on the attitude that they come in here with...and their motivation to return to study..ehm..and their own goals and ehm...pause....I think there's from early on there's a strong..sense that this is like the beginning for them, coming here, even though in some cases they have come from other aspects of sort of return to education but like there is the sense that this is just the start...

Identity, journey

PF mmmm, hmmm

R1 and that em...there is a strong sense from them that whatever they'll do we'll support them individually, you know...

Theme of care, support, individual care for adult learners

Table 3.4

In this next extract R10 is also responding to a question about the ethos towards adult learners in the college. She responded in terms of her experience of being supported and reassured that she was able for the academic demands of the course. In this extract I highlighted/coded data to the developing themes of support for adult learners and social capital.

Theme of support for adult learners
Why might R10 let on she didn't want to hear? Fear of failure? Should have asked her to elaborate on this

. you all would be 'no, you can do it, I know you can do it'. And like that alone does say, I can do it, you know it's hearing someone say it even though you let on you don't want to hear it

Motivating influence; learners' confidence; support

PF mmmm

R10 But you're like, oh do you think so? You walk out of the room saying, no I can do it. They believe I can do it, I know I can do it

PF yeah

R10 And I think like people around each other, I think we all help each other. ...Now it took me a while to get, you know, I couldn't ask people for help

Social support and networks within the learning community; building networks – social capital

Lack of confidence?

R10 I was very embarrassed to show people me work

PF mmm, mmm

R10 I remember even like *(tutor)* even saying if you want you can throw it underneath the door to me, if I'm ever there one day just throw in the work. I'm just gone very. I felt like, I had no confidence in giving it up, I was like that's going to be brutal and they're not going to understand it and I really couldn't show anybody in the class

Table 3.5

Use of language – 'throw it in' – is it devaluing the work? Or making it informal to make it easier to leave in work to be checked. Informality could be a coping strategy

Third phase of data analysis – using NVivo 7

I used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) QSR NVivo 7 to handle and manage the interview data. I imported the transcribed interviews into NVivo 7. I started the process of coding the data by reading the interview transcripts again in NVivo 7 and using the key concepts and theoretical ideas from the theoretical framework, the literature and the research questions to inform the generation of themes and linking them to the patterns identified in the first phase. I started coding extracts of data by creating main tree nodes for each main category or theme and then sub-nodes to represent sub-categories within each theme. As I went through each interview I coded the data relating to the main themes and sub-themes by assigning data to tree

nodes and sub-nodes to reflect the hierarchies of data. The use of NVivo 7 also enabled me to make detailed memos and to produce reports linking data at different nodes.

The process of refining the data involved merging sub-nodes when it became apparent that there were sub-nodes that were similar (in description and coded content) and that there were overlaps in coding (e.g. the same extracts coded under several different nodes). For example in the early stages of coding in NVivo 7 I realised I had coded the response of R16 in relation to the question ‘what are the most important things for adults coming back to education to learn?’ to four nodes/categories (Table 3.6).

<i>Interview question</i>	What are the most important things for adults coming back to education to learn?
<i>Response</i>	to learn to trust that their opinions are valuable, to learn that their life experience is hugely worthwhile, ehm...to learn to have confidence that they can participate in something mainstream.....they would be...yeah that’s what you get so much pleasure out of in teaching adult learners from seeing them go from a position from not valuing at all either their own intellect or their own abilities to two years later to seeing them like having a confidence in all their own abilities and having the confidence that they’re able to move on and for teachers is the reward is seeing them come from a position of ehm....yeah, undervaluing what they’re able to do or not realising their abilities or what they contribute to a position where they feel they can move forward and contribute and have confidence that their opinions are as valuable as the next person’s..
<i>Categories coded to:</i>	1. Education as a journey 2. Personal Development 3. Positive Benefits 4. Success and Achievement

Table 3.6

In order to refine the coding and the data I decided to make 'Education as a journey' a main tree node with Personal Development as a sub-node. I then merged the node Positive Benefits into Success and Achievement to create another sub-node. I then coded the data extract to Personal Development as I felt it was most reflective of this. Figure 3.3 shows the hierarchy in NVivo 7 after this refining.

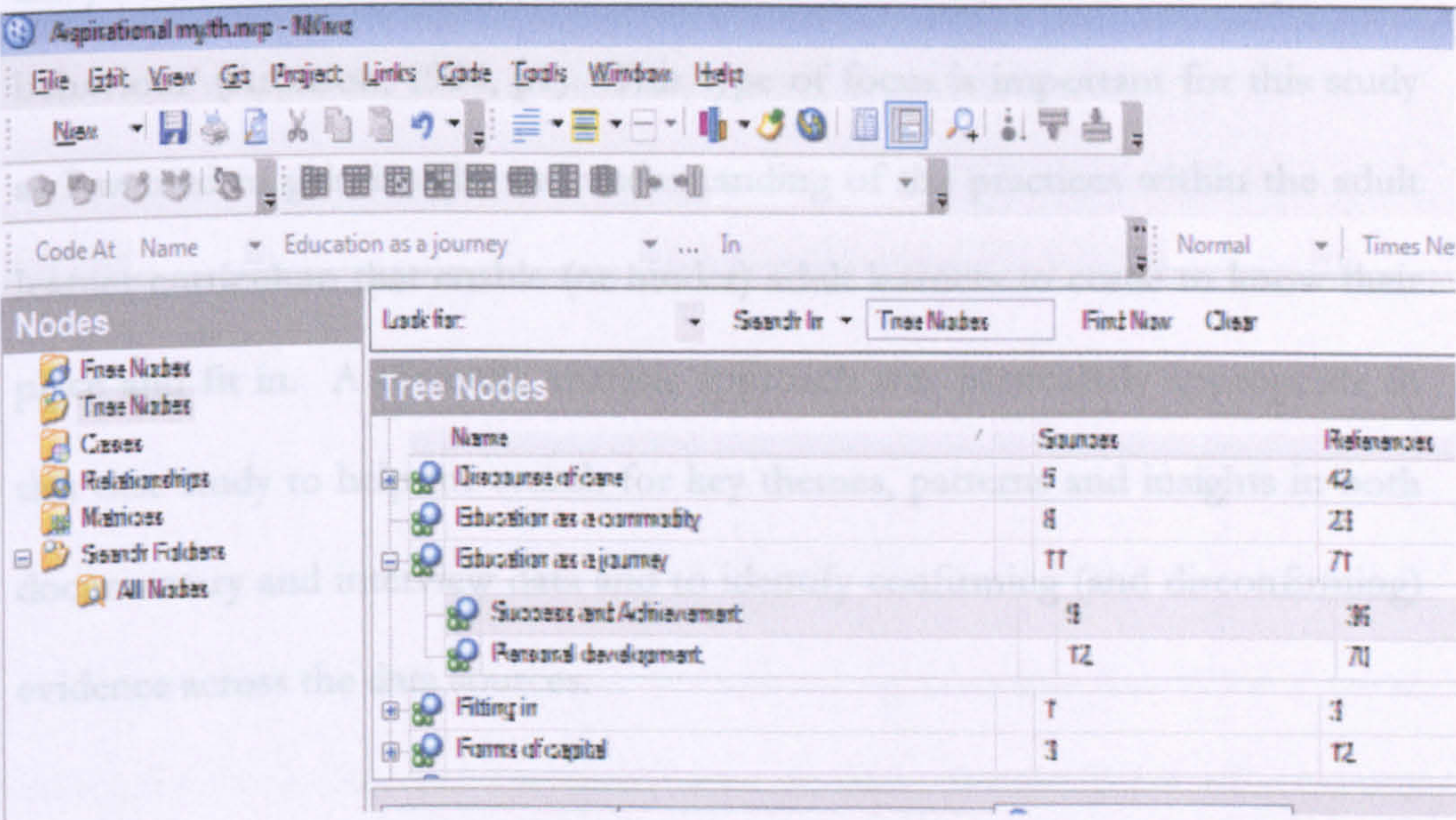


Figure 3.3

Refining the data involved re-reading the interview transcripts again in NVivo and exploring each of the different tree nodes and associated sub-nodes to further refine them. I continued this until there were no new themes generated from the process of engaging with the data and the tree nodes and their associated sub-nodes had been organised into a hierarchy that incorporated all the major themes and sub-themes.

Using NVivo 7 allowed me to generate reports for different tree nodes (main categories/themes) and sub-themes thus viewing all the data for a particular category and allowed for any further refinement (e.g. reallocation of data to

another node etc). I also used NVivo to write memos which allowed me to make sense of the data and link data sources as I engaged in the data analysis process.

Thematic analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an inductive and iterative process and thematic analysis allows for a focus on 'identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour' (Aronson, 1994, p1). This type of focus is important for this study as I wanted to gain insight and understanding of the practices within the adult learner curriculum that enable (or hinder) adult learners to come to know their place and fit in. A thematic analysis approach was particularly appropriate in this case study to help me search for key themes, patterns and insights in both documentary and interview data and to identify confirming (and disconfirming) evidence across the data sources.

Boyatzis (1998, p1) notes 'thematic analysis is a way of seeing...observation precedes understanding. Recognising an important moment (seeing) precedes encoding it (seeing it as something), which in turn precedes interpretation. Thematic analysis moves you through these three phases of enquiry'. Themes are searched for using guiding questions and key issues from the research questions and the literature to inform the analysis. Thematic analysis has its origins in grounded theory but it does not subscribe to the view that themes are already there in the data waiting to be identified. Braun and Clarke (2006, p96) insist that 'the researcher is positioned as *active* in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Thomas and James (2006, p768) challenge 'the continuing legitimacy of grounded theory and the lofty place its methods have come to hold in social and institutional analysis'. They take issue with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) idea that a researcher 'cannot enter an investigation with a guiding theoretical framework or a well thought out design' (Thomas and James, 2006, p781) and question how grounded theorists can 'quarantine themselves, as social selves, from the data they are analysing and re-analysing to enable 'theory' to emerge? As Richards (2005, p68) observes 'theory is a human construct, not an underground reservoir of oil waiting to be discovered when you drill down to it. The researcher discovers themes, or threads in the data, by good exploration, good enquiry'.

In this study the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and St Clair and the critical reading of the literature have provided 'sensitising' concepts that allowed me to search for particular ideas and patterns in the data. Bowen (2006, p7) observes that sensitising concepts 'give the researcher a sense of how observed instances of a phenomenon might fit within conceptual categories' and Charmaz (2003) cited in Bowen (2006, p3) conceives of them as 'ways of 'seeing, organising and understanding experiences'. For example, St Clair's concept of the aspirational myth of adult learner identity opened up sensitising concepts such as 'who we think they are'; 'expectations of adult learners' and 'aspirational behaviours'. These sensitising concepts acted as interpretive devices with which to search the data for examples of what types of aspirational behaviours were linked to different constructions of the aspirational myth of adult learner identity.

Research journal

I used the research journal to record detailed field notes after each interview. I included as much detail as possible about the physical location, interactions with participants, my feelings and emotions and the non-verbal communication of both myself and the participant. Although I recorded as much as possible of the social situation and interactions in the interview in the research journal I was aware that the selected data extracts I used in this thesis are my part of my interpretation and construction. This is important in the light of Stronach and McLure's (1997, p34) emphasis of the role of the researcher/author in 'transform(ing) a person into a portrait'. This raises the 'duality' of representation where the researcher is putting his/her own interpretation onto the story told by a respondent but where there is also the acknowledgement that there are many stories to be told in many different ways.

Rigour

Aroni et al (1999) cited in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006, p3) describe rigour in interpretive research studies as the means by which integrity and competence are demonstrated and Tobin and Begley (2004, p391) posit that rigour in qualitative work is evaluated mainly through examining and establishing the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness is demonstrated and verified through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability enabling qualitative researchers to 'move away from the language of positivist concerns with reliability and validity' (Tobin and Begley, 2004, 391). As Kvale (1995) cited in Tobin and Begley (2004, p389) argues, within a qualitative paradigm 'the concept of an objective reality validating knowledge has been generally discarded'.

Credibility

In qualitative research credibility relates to 'the issue of 'fit' between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them (Schwandt, 2001) cited in Tobin and Begley (2004, p391). This means evaluating the extent to which the research questions were illuminated and answered through a systematic and theoretically informed analysis of the data and assessing the degree of congruence of the findings with reality (Merriam, 1998, p201). In this study I have attended to this by clearly outlining the processes of data analysis, explaining interpretations of the data and by providing examples of raw data to illustrate the findings in the study. Likewise in this study data from all respondents in the individual interviews were used to exemplify the findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which generalisations can be made from the findings of the study and applied to other contexts. In this study the aspirational myth is situated and contextualised and there is no 'true' interpretation of the aspirational myth that can be applied other FE contexts for example. This study seeks to generate understanding however its findings can point the direction for future case study research in other settings.

Dependability

Koch (1994) cited in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006, p3) notes that interpretive research 'requires a trail of evidence throughout the research process to demonstrate credibility or trustworthiness'. In this study I have addressed this by giving a full account of the research process and a clear account of the path, drawing on examples, from the generation of the data to

the findings and explaining my reasons for the particular methodological approach and methods used in this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability seeks to ascertain and establish that the data, findings and the interpretations of the study's findings can be shown to be clearly located in and derived from the data and that they are not just fabrications by the researcher. I have attended to this in the study by providing a clear audit trail for the research process and giving examples from the processes of data analysis to show clearly what I did.

Ethical considerations

There are important ethical issues in every form of research and I outline some of the main ethical concerns in this research process.

Confidentiality and anonymity

In any research study it is essential to guarantee participants' anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the interview process and products. In this study each participant was informed about the nature of the research and was given the opportunity to withdraw at any stage. Participants signed an interview consent form (Appendix 1 & 2) in which I detailed the procedures used for security in respect of the data files and transcripts. In order to gain permission to use quotes in the thesis I drew up a second letter (Appendix 4) in which I again reiterated my commitment to confidentiality and anonymity and restated the option for respondents to withdraw from the research. Each participant was also offered access to their digital interview file and transcript.

In order to protect participants' privacy and maintain confidentiality, the college is not named and respondents are each assigned a label e.g. R1, R2. Respondents may be able to identify themselves in the research but should not be able to identify any other participants.

Chapter summary

The research process is far from smooth and linear and, as Measor and Woods (1991, p59) observe, it is characterised far less by 'antiseptic accounts' which leave out what actually happened and far more by a series of 'stops and starts, false trails and blind alleys' which can yield inspiration and excitement as well as desperation and despair. In this chapter I have discussed the methodological literature and have put forward my methodological stance in the research. I have outlined the methods of data collection and I have discussed the ways in which the research was conducted paying attention to the importance of reflexivity and rigour in the research process and the ethical consideration for this study. In the next chapter I move on to provide a discussion and analysis of the specified adult learner curriculum drawing on the documentary data for the study.

Chapter 4 – The Return to Education curriculum

Originally, a curriculum was a running track for athletes, which reminds us of the features still associated with the word – starting and finishing lines, inner and outer tracks, sorting out the competitors, drawing up a programme of events and deciding who are the winners and the losers

(Trant, 2007, p1)

Introduction

The curriculum, both prescribed and hidden, is one of the main conduits for the messages that adult learners may receive and internalise as they come to learn who and how to be when they return to formal education. Griffin (1978) cited in Jarvis (2004, p245) observes that the curriculum can refer to ‘the entire range of educational practices or learning experiences’.

The key focus of this research is to examine the ways in which adult learners come to know their place and learn who or how to be when they return to formal education. My main interest is to explore the specific practices, via the adult learner curriculum, through which the conceptualisation of adult learner identity is co-constructed and mediated and through which adult learners come to know their place and fit in when they return to education. I argue that adult learners need to acquire the academic and social knowledges and practices – enculturation into the ‘college knowledge’ of FE - in order to fit in and acquire different and more privileged forms of capital.

Informed by the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and St Clair this chapter examines the curriculum under scrutiny with the aim of identifying the interests and assumptions represented in its development and its espoused delivery

providing an analysis of the documentary data to explore the following research questions:

- In what ways does the notion of an aspirational myth of the ‘adult learner’ illuminate the construction of adult learners’ identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme
- What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult education curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these ‘right’ kinds of knowledge?
- In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital?

This chapter is structured into four main sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the field of further education and current adult education policy in Ireland and the background and context to the course in order to map out the landscape within which the return to education course is located and Figure 4.1, p89 provides an overview of the influences and interests on the development of the adult learner curriculum. The remaining three sections present the findings from the analysis of the documentary data and I draw on a framework model (Figure 4.2, p 96) to structure this discussion.

Influences on the development of the Return to Education course curriculum

The development of any course curriculum is underpinned by different interests, values and assumptions. In this first section I provide a diagrammatic representation of the different influences on the development of the curriculum

for the return to education course to contextualise it within the broader field of further education in Ireland (Figure 4.1). Legislation in the form of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 regulates and influences FETAC accreditation processes. The remit of the local area partnerships is influenced by government social policy and adult education policy and by changing employment trends in the labour market. These in turn influence the aims, structure and content of the course. The course planning and development team are both guided and constrained by these influences in their development of curriculum content.

Influences

FETAC Accreditation

- Structured award with some mandatory subjects (Work Experience & Communications for every award)
- Emphasis on vocational education – gaining technical knowledge and skills for employment in a particular vocational area
- Outcome based with prescribed content in each module with specific learning outcomes
- FETAC links with economic and labour market demands
- Links with National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

Influences

Remit of local area partnerships – to combat educational disadvantage and long-term unemployment

- To help long-term unemployed back into employment and to create local employment
- Identified the need to raise the profile of education in the community
- Identified need for outreach education workers in community
- Facilitate access to accredited courses (greater symbolic and economic capitals) leading to employment or further/higher education

Influences

Aims of the course, structure and content

- To provide a broad-based 'liberal' education, what people 'miss out on when they drop out of school' as well as a recognised qualification for progression to employment or further/higher education
- Second chance education – based on adult education ethos
- Emphasis on 'structured opportunities' and a range of built-in supports for adult learners

Influences

Influences

Course planning and development team comprised of representatives from the local area based partnership,
local employment services, the college and local community groups

Influences

The specified curriculum of the Return to Education course

Further education in Ireland

The field of further education in Ireland has undergone rapid change since the 1970s. From 1977 until the 1980s pre-employment courses were run mainly in second level vocational schools. These courses 'were intended for students who would ordinarily leave school to seek employment on attaining the school leaving age⁸ but, in failing to get employment, would return to school to attend a course specifically aimed at assisting them in their efforts to secure a job' (Department of Education, 1978) cited in Trant (2007, p95). In order to address falling enrolments in schools and extensive unemployment post-Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) had begun to develop in vocational schools in the 1980s with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF). As Trant (2007, p97) notes they were 'a spontaneous expression of school-based curriculum development in the vocational sector' and not in keeping with official policy at the time. Some were certified by UK organisations (such as City and Guilds and Royal Society of Arts) and others by the schools themselves as there were no certifying bodies in Ireland at the time.⁹ In 1991 the Department of Education set up the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) to provide certification for the vocational PLCs (Trant, 2007). Under the Qualifications (Training and Education) Act 1999 the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)¹⁰ was established in June 2001 and, as Trant (2007, p99) observes, it 'marked the official recognition of a

⁸ The school leaving age in Ireland is sixteen years

⁹ The City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) developed its own certification

¹⁰ See Glossary of Terms

new chapter in the history of vocational education¹¹ in Ireland – the coming into existence of the further education sector.

Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 further education and training is defined as ‘education and training other than primary or post-primary education or higher education’ and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) have defined further education and training awards as ‘those made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council at Levels 1-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications’ (Dempsey and O’Dwyer, 2005, p6).

The FETAC Level 5 award

The FETAC Level 5¹² award in Community and Health Services is the official curriculum for the return to education course. Reporting on further education and training provision in Ireland Dempsey and O’Dwyer (2005, p7) observe that FETAC programmes ‘typically have a vocational focus and reflect national, regional or sectoral economic needs. Programmes also aim to develop personal skills’. Reflecting the emphasis of government policy on the importance of education and training for the modern economy with the emphasis on skills acquisition for employment FETAC Level 5 awards are designed to:

...enable learners to develop a broad range of skills, which are vocational specific and require a general theoretical understanding. They are enabled to work independently/subject to general

¹¹ There are two vocational education programmes within mainstream second-level education – the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Further education is post-compulsory education and training certified by FETAC

¹² Level 5 on the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) framework

direction. The majority of certificate/module holders at level 5 take up positions of employment

(www.fetac.ie)

Adult education policy in Ireland

Prior to 1997 there was little investment in promoting adult education in Ireland and most adult education provision took place through the Vocational Education Committees (VECs)¹³. Keogh (2004) cited in Keogh (2006, p3) likened the unstructured ad hoc provision of adult education in the VECs as the 'heroic model' which might be characterised as the 'Superser in one hand and the electric kettle in the other' as part-time and temporary staff tried to provide opportunities for adult learning. After years of lack of investment the Irish government began to make a commitment to adult education with the appointment in 1997 of the first Minister of State for Adult Education, the Green Paper (DES, 1998), the White Paper (DES, 2000) and initiatives such as the establishment in 1989 of the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), the Third Level Allowance Scheme¹⁴ (1990), the Adult Education Guidance Initiative (2000) and the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) in 2002.¹⁵ Government policy was broadened to include a commitment to those who had left initial education early, those who had low educational attainment and those who were disadvantaged. However both Fleming (2004) and Grummell (2007) note that adult education policies in both Ireland and the UK have been 'dominated by a discourse of economic change' which places value on 'the learning that supports economic development' (Fleming, 2004, p15). Although O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2007, p15) suggest that along with this there

¹³ See Glossary of Terms

¹⁴ Now called Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) – see Glossary of Terms

¹⁵ See Glossary of Terms for explanation of VTOS, Third Level Allowance Scheme, Adult Guidance Initiative and BTEI

is the 'social democratic' function of education where 'individuals' qualifications, skills and experiences are valued, both for their own empowering merit and their contribution to a more just society' Fleming (2004, p15) argues that even this rhetoric of 'social inclusion and equality' has an 'economic intent'.

Fleming's argument that the discourse of adult education is one of valuing the learning that sustains 'economic development' is significant for this study in relation to accreditation as capital and points to questions for interviews in relation to examining the issue of accreditation and questioning the kinds of pressure the drive towards accreditation exerts on both learners and tutors and whether, as Keyes (2004, p71) suggests it 'takes the major focus away from the student to the subject'.

Return to Education course – background and context

The return to education course was first presented in September 2001¹⁶. Research conducted by the local area partnership in 1999 identified the need to raise awareness in the local community about educational opportunities outside of (largely unaccredited) community education courses leading to accreditation and also a need for education outreach workers in the community. Embracing the partnership's remit to tackle long-term unemployment and educational disadvantage the adult education sub-committee of the local area partnership (comprising representatives from the partnership, community and local employment services and the college) developed the proposal for the course. As Fleming (2004, p11) notes 'the Partnership companies with Education co-

¹⁶ There have been return to education courses previously in the college but not in association with the local partnership

ordinators have been a major contributor to the development of adult education interventions in disadvantaged areas’.

Having briefly discussed the key influences on curriculum development I now move on to present the analysis and findings of the documentary data.

Analysis of findings from the documentary data

The remainder of this chapter presents the findings from the documentary data and I use the framework model (Figure 4.2, p98) to structure this discussion. The left hand side of the model provides guiding questions and issues informed by the theoretical framework and critical reading that are used to guide the analysis of the documentary data. The right hand side of the model details the elements of the specified curriculum (in the form of documentary data) that will be examined to illuminate the research questions under scrutiny. Each section commences with a diagram detailing the guiding questions on the left and the key headings of the findings on the right. The first section draws on the concepts of the aspirational myth and habitus to explore the construction of the adult learner identity in the documentary data. The second section provides an examination of the types of knowledges that are legitimated and validated in the curriculum and the types of capitals implicated in the process of curriculum development. The final section explores the different capitals offered to adult learners in the course and the legitimation these are given. Drawing on the theoretical framework I identify the points of tension in the espoused philosophy of the adult learner curriculum that raise questions concerning the delivery, enactment and experience of the curriculum. These questions will be

revisited in the analysis of the interview data in Chapter 5 and again in the discussion in Chapter 6.

The case study of the adult learner curriculum – a framework for interrogation

Guiding questions

Constructing the adult learner

- Who do we think they are?
- Dissonance & congruence between adult learners' habituses and the institutional habitus; institutional habitus and ethos

Data to be interrogated

Valid and legitimate knowledge

- What is deemed legitimate and valid knowledge and who decides?
- Selective process of including/excluding (the null curriculum) certain subjects over others
- To what extent is learners' knowledge used, valued, re-constructed, subjugated in curriculum development?
- Involvement (or lack) of learners in curriculum planning

Data to be interrogated

Accessing capitals

- How do adult learners come to know their place through assessment?
- Accreditation as currency
- Progression routes – building on capitals gained
- Work experience; learning to become 'whom' or 'what'?
- What forms of social networks and social capitals are available to adult learners?

Data to be interrogated

The specified official curriculum

The aspirational identity

- Course design and planning
- College prospectus with outline of Return to Education course – general information and course content; mapping progression routes from the course
- Additional course information documentation

Validating and legitimating knowledge

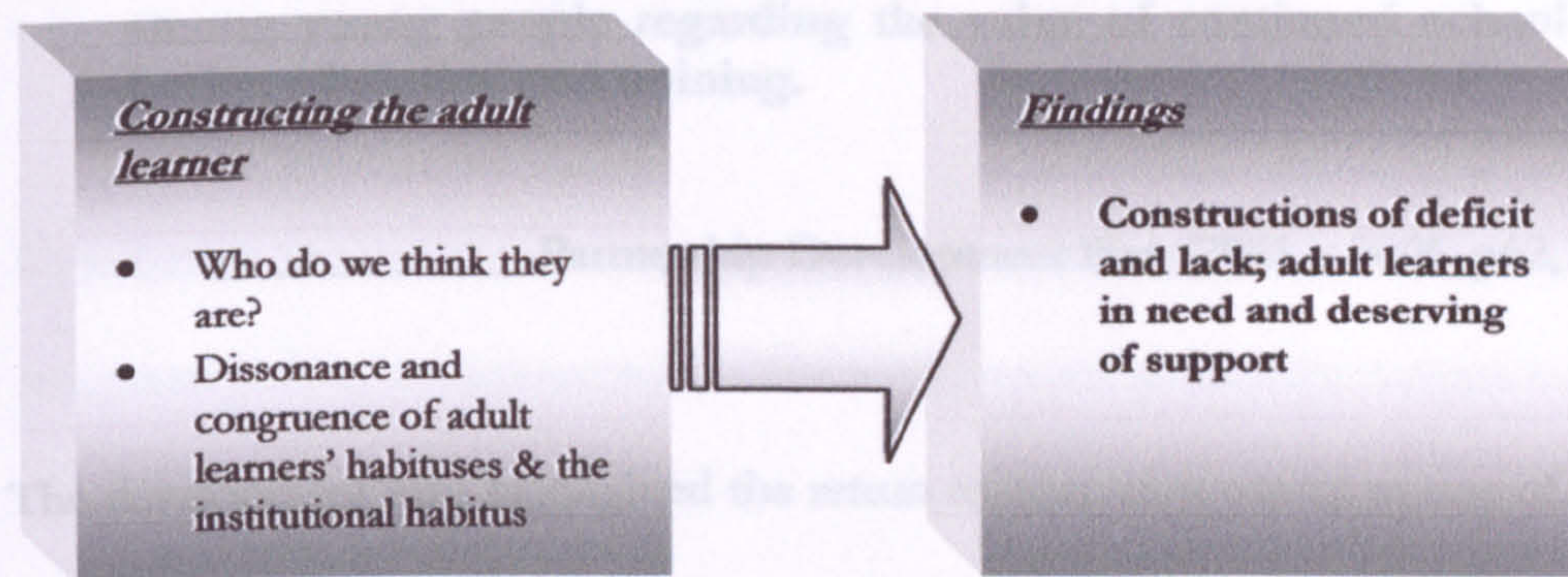
- The full FETAC modules making up the full chosen FETAC Level 5 award (Health & Community Services) and articulated in official documentation
- FETAC module descriptors, assessment documents and processes;
- Non-assessed subjects - part of official curriculum as they are timetabled subjects but have no formal assessment or accreditation attached

Accessing more privileged social and cultural capitals

- College assessment processes and practices
- FETAC external moderation process – accreditation and legitimization of FETAC award
- The higher education links scheme which outlines paths for progression from FETAC Level 5 certificate to the next levels on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) via further and higher education (gaining and using cultural capital)
- Graduate profiles in college brochure (building on cultural capital gained)

Figure 4.2

The aspirational myth of the adult learner identity and the construction of identity, subject positioning and sense of place



Deficit and lack – adult learners in need of support

The 1999 research conducted by the partnership identified the need for a course that would firstly provide accredited training for participants as community education support workers working to raise the profile of education and secondly a broad-based general education for those who had not completed second level school. The following extract from the partnership development plan (2001-2006) draws on the 1996 census data¹⁷ for the local area. This data showed higher levels of early school leaving¹⁸ and of students with only primary education compared with national averages. The extract links the lack of basic education and educational qualifications with high unemployment rates and social and economic disadvantage in the local community:

There is no doubt that the lack of educational qualifications, and possibly basic education at these levels, are major components in employment opportunity, and hence poverty and social disadvantage in _____ Partnership....it is widely observed that a serious degree of demotivation and despair exists with those disadvantaged in the area. This marginalisation is particularly manifest in the lack of take-up of education, training and community education efforts in the area, and it engenders a reluctance to engage unnecessarily with the statutory agencies...This leads to an automatic antipathy towards positive attitudes to education and training initiatives and the various options available to people who are unemployed. In turn, personal

¹⁷ Figures are from the small area populations statistics (SAPS) – 1996 census

¹⁸ In Ireland the school leaving age is sixteen years

and institutional confidence levels become progressively lower for unemployed adults which inevitably inculcates adverse perceptions among young people regarding the value of continued school or further education and training.

_____ Partnership Development Plan (2001 – 2006, p62, 64)

The development plan highlighted the return to education course as one of the targeted actions to redress this educational and social disadvantage. The general aim of the course was to 'combine focused skills development with the provision of the broad based education that is missed out on when people drop out of the mainstream education system'. The key objectives included:

- **To provide structured opportunities for participants to develop their own initiative, competence and ability to be self-directed**
- **To ensure progression routes from the course into either employment or ongoing education/training**
- **To provide necessary academic and practical support to participants**

(Course planning discussion document, 2000)

By highlighting both the lack of basic educational qualifications and of available economic and symbolic capital in the community and the lack of uptake of available educational and training opportunities the extract from the development plan positions many residents of the local community in terms of educational deficit. The aims and objectives of the course construct the prospective learner as someone lacking in a broad-based general education again giving rise to the notion of deficit. The course with its 'structured opportunities' and in-built supports aims to remedy this enabling them to become more self-directed, develop 'initiative and competence' and to gain

access to the more privileged forms of symbolic capital (qualifications) leading to employment and educational chances.

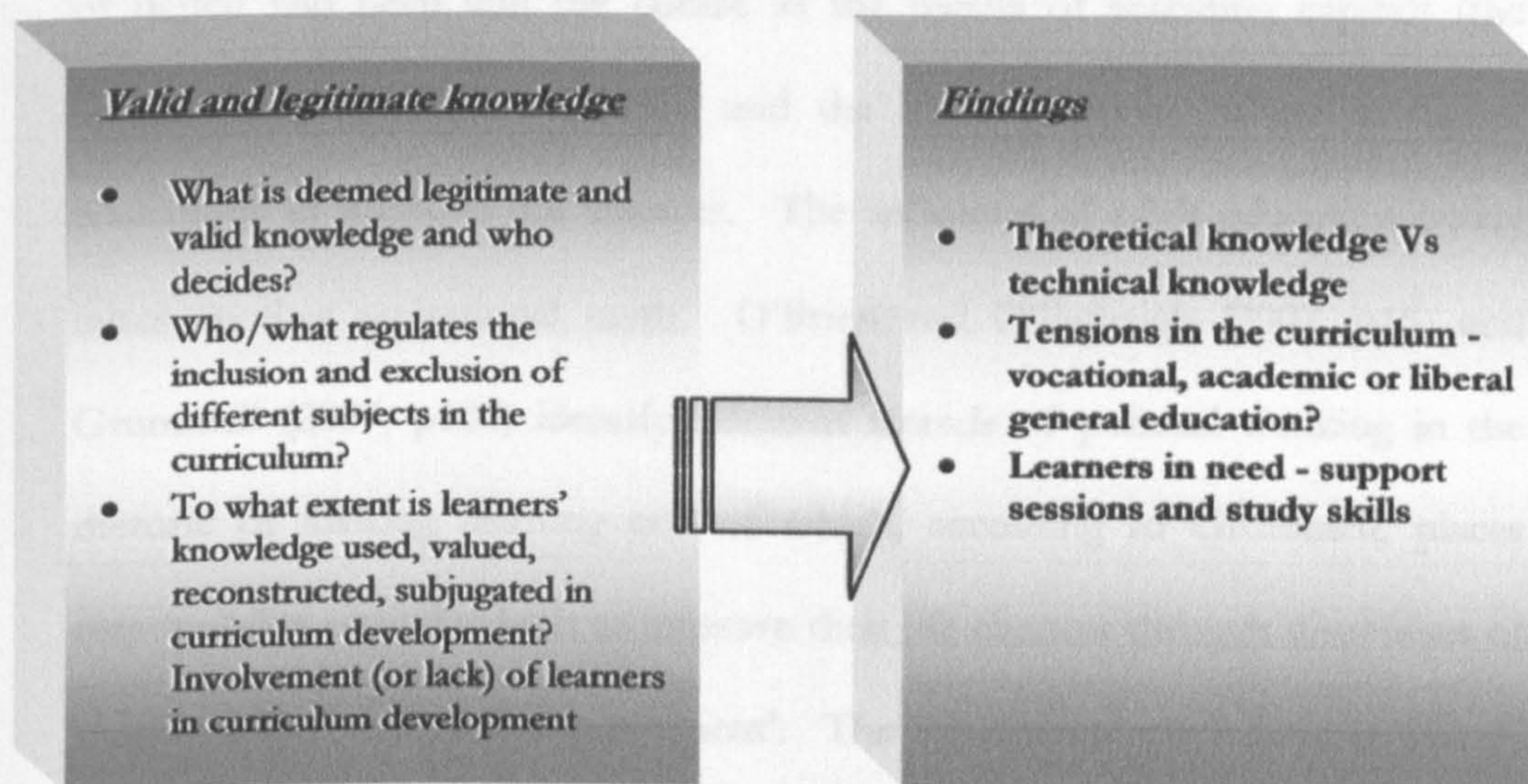
By targeting 'mature students and those who have left school early' the college prospectus offers a construction of the adult learner as an early school leaver with few formal educational qualifications. McFadden (1995, p42) comments on the idea of 'targeting' suggesting that it tends to stigmatise certain groups in the community by focusing on deficit. The college prospectus positions the course as a bridge towards accessing the capitals of employment or further/higher level qualifications. Information about the course is also provided in the form of a flyer or course information leaflet¹⁹. The front page invites prospective learners to 'keep your benefits and access training allowances' and 'have the same holidays as your children' while 'training for the world of work or further education'. This highlights the differential in capitals between the world of those receiving social welfare payments and those who are part of the 'world of work and further education' and points to a dissonance in habitus between those two worlds. The course is a means by which to access the social goods linked with these more privileged capitals (qualifications, employment and associated pay and status). As Grummell (2007, p192) notes 'adult education becomes a part of the world of work and training, incorporating people's actions to the functions and requirements of the marketplace'.

¹⁹ The partnership research (1999) found that a key reason for low participation in adult education was the way in which information about education was disseminated and that 'most of the information sheets, posters and flyers were not written in reader friendly language'. The leaflet was originally designed for the first presentation of the course by the local area partnership and is updated yearly and distributed to houses, shops, businesses in the local area and to public libraries and post-offices in a wider geographical area

The prominence given to prospective learners' lack of educational qualifications in the examples used so far is in keeping with the views of Reay (2002, p404) who suggests that 'the uncredentialed' can be constructed as 'unfinished...or incomplete in some way' and argues that this advances a deficit view of those who do not complete compulsory education. But this does not account for the many reasons why someone may not have completed compulsory education. McFadden (1995, p41) argues that irrespective of the reasons why people might have performed poorly at school and/or left early 'such performance has typically and effectively closed off a range of educational, and therefore, life options'. The course offers a second chance opportunity and as Waller (2004, p26) observes 'without Access and similar courses, further, and consequently, higher education is traditionally barred to these unsuccessful at school so opportunities for upward social mobility...are limited'.

The construction of the adult learner as lacking in education and skills raises questions in relation to the enacted and experienced curriculum. For example, different expectations of adult learners can influence the ways in which tutors recontextualise knowledge through their teaching practice, the ways they approach assessment and the ways in which adult learners are supported in the return to education programme which in turn can facilitate or compromise learners' opportunities to gain greater forms of capital. In the interviews I raise questions with tutors, learners and managers about how different expectations of adult learners might influence teaching and support practices and the ways in which respondents experience these practices as either empowering or as fostering dependency.

What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult learner curriculum and in what ways do adult learners returning to education access these knowledges?



Theoretical knowledge Vs technical knowledge

The course aimed to provide an accredited route into employment and/or higher level education as well as a general broad-based education for learners who may have missed out by leaving school early. An emerging tension was whether or not the broad course content reflective of the dual purpose nature of the course could be incorporated into the constraints of the FETAC accredited model and if it was possible within this framework to offer both a vocational qualification and a general academic education without diluting one or other of these.

St Clair (2001, p5) attaches importance to asking 'what knowledge is being included in the curriculum, where it comes from, what is missed out, and whose interests the selection of knowledge serves'. Figure 4.2 showed the different competing interests influencing curriculum development. The remit of the partnership was to tackle educational disadvantage and long-term

unemployment and the course aim of opening up access to qualifications and a general education reflects this. The adult learner identity implicated here is one of deficit and need and the course as the means of accessing capitals (the symbolic capital of accreditation and the cultural capital valued in higher education) to improve life chances. The influence of adult education policy raises another aspirational myth. O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2007, p15) and Grummell (2007, p182) identify different strands of political thinking in the rhetoric of lifelong learning one of which, according to Grummell, places responsibility on individuals to improve their life chances through discourses of 'employability' and 'self-improvement'. The aspirational myth here is that of the learner charged with improving his/her own life chances through taking the available opportunities.

In order to provide both accreditation and to enable learners access VTOS and the Post-Leaving Certificate grant²⁰ a full-time accredited course had to be offered. However no single award reflected the full scope of the course²¹ and it was decided 'for reasons of flexibility to give an NCVA award at Level 2 in Community & Health Services' (Discussion document, 2001). This flexibility meant that there were only two compulsory modules (along with Communications and Work Experience) meaning the remainder could be selected to match as closely as possible with the original proposed content. However, the Community & Health Services award is aimed towards employment in the broad arena of social care and this differed significantly from the original proposal centred on a particular qualification leading to the

²⁰ Without these financial supports many learners would have been unable to do the course

²¹ Either adult education or community development

symbolic and economic capital of the job of community education support worker. An interim evaluation report noted disappointment that 'the ultimate certification that was to be granted did not fully reflect the focus of the course' (Interim Evaluation Report, 2002, p19).

Table 4.1 on the following page outlines the range of subject studied in the original return to education course and Appendix 5 outlines the range of possible subjects to be included in the FETAC Level 5 award offered on the social care course²²

²² FETAC Level 5 award in Community & Health Services - DCHSX

<i>First year subjects</i>	<i>Second year subjects</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Human Growth and Development</i>* • <i>Work Experience</i>* • Social Studies * • Computer Applications ** • Personal Development * • Study skills/learning support *** • Art and creativity *** • Local History *** • Evaluation session *** • English support class *** • Maths *** 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Communications</i>* • <i>Care Provision and Practice</i>* • Information Technology skills • Peer Education * • Evaluation session *** • English *** • Art and creativity *** • Study skills/learning support *** • Educational and careers guidance sessions (on monthly or as needs basis) ***

Table 4.1 – Original specified curriculum

1. Emboldened and italicised subjects are mandatory for this FETAC Award
2. * Denotes FETAC Level 5 module; ** Denotes FETAC Level 4 module;
*** Denotes non-assessed subject

The selection of Human Growth and Development²³ and Care Provision and Practice²⁴ as the set modules (from a given list²⁵) can be related to the criteria for course content selection identified by Jarvis (1983) cited in Jarvis (2004, p249, 250) namely professional practice and relevance. This is supported by evidence from the course planning material where proposed course content was linked to the aims of the course and the skills/knowledge required by learners:

Requisite knowledge - needs assessment and provision; poverty and social structures; psychology & human development; outreach skills and strategies; equality awareness

(Curriculum planning document, 2000)

²³ Human Growth and Development – an introduction to developmental psychology through the lifespan

²⁴ Care Provision and Practice – aims to help learners develop a range of personal and interpersonal qualities necessary for work in many care environments

²⁵ Anatomy and Physiology; Care Provision and Practice; Child Development; Early Childhood Education; Safety & Health at Work; Human Growth and Development; Introduction to Nursing

The remaining listed modules were excluded as they were highly discipline-specific to areas such as childcare or nursing. Human Growth and Development and Care Provision and Practice were chosen because they provided learners with the groundwork in developmental psychology and social care provision which is transferable (capitals that can be harnessed and built upon) to employment or further study in social care or psychology. This reflects the general aims of FETAC modules. For example, the module descriptor for Human Growth and Development states that it is designed for those 'who wish to work in a variety of community/social care settings...to understand the concepts of mental age and chronological age in order to be able to related to people at a level appropriate to their needs. The module is also aimed at learners who wish to pursue further studies in this area'.

The vocational thrust of FETAC certification and the broader discourse of lifelong learning are reflected in the stated purpose for the two mandatory Communications and Work Experience modules. For example:

Communication skills are highly valued in the workplace but this module extends beyond exclusively vocational needs, recognising that the acquisition of these skills is a life-long process, and central to personal, social and professional development and fulfilment

(NCVA 2001)

Likewise, the Work Experience module is 'a planned experiential learning activity' and is 'an integral part of an educational process (NCVA 2001).

The compulsory work placement enables students to develop and use the core skills and applied knowledge they have gained during the course and provides an opportunity for learners to build on social capital by developing contacts

within social care organisations. There is evidence of this over the duration of the course to date where several learners have gained full-time employment when they received their full certification as a direct result of their work placement. With this employment also came access to the cultural capital of higher level education as learners were sponsored to gain higher level qualifications in order to progress.

Work Experience and Communications can be seen as skills-based subjects with an emphasis on developing core transferable skills. Waller (2005, p55) notes that the curriculum of an Access to higher education course will usually have 'core activities' such as 'study skills, numeracy, literacy and communication skills in addition to subject specific knowledge' and similarly, all FETAC modules refer to the development of 'learners' core skills' as a stated objective of vocational education and training. These core skills include 'becoming literate and numerate', 'communicating orally and in writing', 'problem solving' and 'working effectively in group situations' and 'applying theoretical knowledge in practical situations'.

Ecclestone (1999, p34) argues that the debate surrounding outcomes-based learning and assessment is 'rife with false dichotomies between what is 'relevant' and 'irrelevant' learning'; learning 'theory' versus 'useful practical skills'; subject 'content' versus 'transferable learning' and suggests that it raises the issue of the 'elevation of generic learning skills over immersion in a subject or professional discipline'. This work has significance for this study for the investigation of the tension surrounding the degrees of significance given to theoretical knowledge and core transferable skills. Outcome-based learning and

criterion-based assessment form the basis of the FETAC model of vocational education with the 'development of learners' core skills a stated objective of vocational education and training'.

The current curriculum

The curriculum has expanded since the first course presentation and Table 4.2 lists the subjects currently offered.

<i>First year subjects</i>	<i>Second year subjects</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Human Growth and Development</i> * • <i>Care Provision and Practice</i> * • Occupational First Aid * • <i>Communications</i> * • Computer Applications ** • Personal and Interpersonal Skills ** • Study skills/learning support *** • Exercise and Fitness *** • Evaluation session *** • English support class *** 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Work Experience</i> * • Social Studies * • Legal Studies * • Care of the Child with Special Needs * • Word Processing * • Equality and Disability * • Evaluation session *** • Study skills/learning support *** • Educational and careers guidance sessions (on monthly or as needs basis) ***

Table 4.2 – Current specified curriculum

1. Emboldened and italicised subjects are mandatory for this FETAC Award
2. * Denotes FETAC Level 5 module; ** Denotes FETAC Level 4 module;

*** Denotes non-assessed subject

The curriculum offers eleven²⁶ FETAC Level 5 modules and has become more far-reaching in both its disciplinary and skills content offering learners the opportunity to study introductory developmental psychology, sociology and law; knowledge and skills of first aid, word processing and computer

²⁶ In each award two Level 4 modules can be combined to give on Level 5 – in this case Personal and Interpersonal Skills together with Computer Applications are combined

applications and applied knowledge in such areas such as equality and disability and care of the child with special needs. The gradual broadening out of the course content has come about as a result of course review meetings and end-of-course learner evaluations²⁷. The changing curriculum reflects a move to open up greater access to social, cultural and symbolic capitals for learners in response to both changing employment trends (and learners' expectations) and to the wider educational expectations of learners in terms of accessing further and higher education at Levels 6 and 7. Sarangi (1996, p208) observes that students bring important expectations to vocational education and that 'they may see the mastery of a range of skills as a form of cultural capital which can be turned in later years to economic capital (getting jobs) and/or academic capital (entry to higher education)'. For example, Care of the Child with Special Needs was included because of the increasing numbers of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) being employed in primary education and learners' interest in this career.

A brief analysis of different curriculum materials for Human Growth and Development shows the legitimization of different knowledges (skills acquisition or theoretical) across different texts. Of the six general aims of the module four are skills-based and two are based on understanding of human development (Table 4.3).

²⁷ In end of year/course evaluations students are asked for their opinions about the course content and its relevance in respect of their aspirations towards employment or further/higher education.

General aims of FETAC Human Growth and Development

On successful completion of this module learners should be able to:

- Understand the concept of human development from conception to old age
- Understand normal patterns of development from infancy to old age
- Explore their own personal prejudices, fears and anxieties about working with people in need of care
- Develop interpersonal interactive skills appropriate to responding to the needs of others
- Apply skills and knowledge to typical work-based problems
- Develop self-confidence and empathy in dealing with people

(NCVA 2001)

Table 4.3

The specific learning outcomes (SLOs) are broadly divided between skills acquisition and helping strategies and developmental psychology of the human lifespan (Appendix 6). Formal assessment comprises two case studies (60%) and one examination (40%). Assessment criteria for the case studies privilege skills development, assessment of needs and development of helping strategies. For example, learners will have to provide an 'accurate assessment of needs' of a client in a case study and then describe 'appropriate strategies for meeting needs in terms of individual/family/ community/government involvement'. Analysis of the course textbook and examination papers showed theoretical knowledge to be privileged over applied knowledge and skills. The first Irish textbook for the subject was published in April 2008 and its main focus is on 'lifespan development...key debates within psychology e.g. nature vs. nurture, stages from infancy to adulthood within framework of physical, cognitive and

socio-emotional theories' (O'Brien, 2008). Each chapter provides case study material for application of theory. Analysis of end of year examinations²⁸ showed that examination questions focused on theoretical knowledge with four out of five questions on psychological theories and only one question relating to applied knowledge/skills development (Appendix 7). The issue of the ways in which different knowledges are privileged in the interpretation, enactment and delivery of the curriculum will be explored in the interviews by posing questions for tutors firstly relating to their perceptions of the purpose of the different subjects included in the curriculum and secondly in relation to the types of capital that are legitimated through the subjects on offer in the curriculum.

Tensions in the curriculum - vocational, academic or liberal general education?

Along with an accredited qualification the course aimed to provide a 'broad based education that is missed out on when people drop out of the mainstream education system' and it was envisaged that this general education could:

...take the form of Junior/Leaving Cert. level in Maths, History, Geography, Science, Economics, Literature, art/music/drama/crafts but the idea is not so much to get a state certificate for it as to give the participants a positive experience of general education, to turn them on to education and make up for the broad based knowledge they miss when they drop out of school

(Discussion document, 2000)

The rationale for inclusion of these subjects can be viewed through the lens of remedying deficit through offering a 'second chance' opportunity and this is supported by the construction of the prospective adult learner as someone with few educational qualifications and 'in need' of a general education because of

²⁸ From 2001 to 2008

this which is evident from the analysis in the earlier part of this chapter. As Grummell (2007, p183) observes 'adult education is often described as 'second chance', offering adults a chance to re-access education systems or to re-train in new educational skills and knowledge'.

At the time of course development there were no general education subjects in the range of FETAC Level 5 modules²⁹. It was decided to go ahead with the general education subjects but without attaching accreditation to them (e.g. Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate) however this lack of assessment and accreditation meant that the subjects lacked currency. Drudy and Lynch (1993, p267) argue that 'offering people certificates, diplomas, and the like, often based on short courses that are not formally recognised by established accrediting bodies (indeed often not recognised by the very authorities that provide them) seems to be an insult to the people who take the courses'. The suggested content for the subjects was outlined in a course planning document:

Maths – practical household budgets, simple account keeping etc
History – local history project perhaps linking in with one or more community groups
English – literature and composition but relevant to daily life etc
Science – household chemicals, illness, medication etc
Creativity – music, art, drama as a way of developing confidence, self-esteem etc, training through the arts

(Discussion document, 2000)

The suggested content for Maths and Science, for example, can be interrogated in respect of their legitimacy as 'useful knowledge' and who decides. The construction of the adult learner here is also open to question. Studies by Tomlin (2002) and Swain et al (2005) cited in Oughton (2007, p266) found that

²⁹ Since then Mathematics and Local History are available as FETAC Level 5 modules

adult learners' motivation in attending numeracy classes reflected a desire to engage in mathematical problems, understand maths for themselves and to help their children rather than for employment or day to day life purposes. By constructing learners as in need of 'practical household budgets', 'simple account keeping' or 'household chemicals' they are being denied access to higher status capitals and as, Oughton notes, positioned once again as 'deficit'.

Table 4.4 profiles the non-assessed subjects in the original curriculum and the current curriculum. It became evident during timetable planning meetings that the demands of FETAC subjects coupled with the constraints of the mornings-only timetable would limit the number of non-accredited subjects offered. Table 4.4 shows that many of the planned non-accredited subjects did not appear in the final curriculum.

<i>Non-assessed subjects in the original curriculum</i>	<i>Non-assessed subjects in current curriculum</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art and creativity (included painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, bead-making, masks, outings to local art museum etc) – ran for three years • Local history (also included trips to areas of historical interest both locally and nationally) – ran for three years and ended when the class tutor left the college • Maths (did not follow a prescribed syllabus and classes based more on needs articulated by learners) – only ran for first year of the course and really only for a few months • Study skills/learner support – has run from the beginning of course • Evaluation session - has run from beginning of the course • English support class – has run from the beginning of the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise and fitness (use of fully equipped gym; personal training programme for each individual participant). It replaced art and creativity – run for last three years but currently up for review • Study skills/learner support – has run from the beginning of course • Evaluation session - has run from beginning of the course • English support class – has run from the beginning of the course

Table 4.4

English is the only remaining general subject from the proposed six or seven in the original plans. Study skills and the evaluation³⁰ session remain as supports. Analysis of the attendance registers for all these subjects (apart from local history) going back to the start of the course to the present reveals a pattern of low to (in some cases) zero attendance for the non-accredited subjects. The inclusion of these subjects in the curriculum raised three main problems. Firstly, the lack of accreditation meant that the subjects had no real currency, secondly, the assumption that learners actually wanted these subjects in the first place and

³⁰ Evaluation sessions were conducted weekly by community links worker and used to enable participants share experiences and ideas and feed back into the course.

thirdly, defining their actual purpose and function in a largely vocational course. These problems raise questions around whether the course was being overstretched in its attempt to enable adult learners gain access to as wide a range of capitals as possible and whether it can offer adult learners both a vocational and general education and Trant's (2007, p99) argument that in any scrutiny of vocational education there is a danger of 'over-emphasising its practical and work-oriented dimension at the expense of its liberal potential' is pertinent here. There are also questions regarding the legitimacy and relevance of non-accredited subjects as 'useful knowledge', their currency as capital in their non-accredited format and why they continue to be offered if students don't attend. In the interviews with learners, tutors and managers I investigate these problems by posing questions relating to the purpose and value of the non-accredited subjects in the curriculum for respondents and their future in a changing curriculum.

Summary

The FETAC Level 5 award is primarily a vocational qualification with technical and applied knowledge ('knowing how') largely privileged in FETAC curriculum documents and within the wider discourses of further education. The curriculum has broadened out to increase learners' chances of accessing greater forms of capital by offering a wider range of FETAC subjects. Non-accredited general education subjects were also included in the adult learner curriculum to provide a broad-based education but analysis of attendance showed low numbers attending raising questions concerning the value and legitimacy of these subjects for learners and tutors. The next section outlines

the rationale for inclusion of the built-in support sessions and provides a brief discussion of the study skills support.

Learners in need - support sessions

McGivney (1996, p144) argues that 'many students, especially those with little recent learning experience, require assistance in returning to formal study, and all aspects of a learning programme should be designed to offer them maximum encouragement and support'. In the course planning strong emphasis was placed on the provision of a range of supports including 'career guidance, study/personal support on a one-to-one and/or a group basis and guidance and counselling' and 'the extra supports adult require when returning to education' (Course planning document, 2001). The course was aimed at people 'who already have a basic standard of education and are, with support, capable of working at an NCVA Level 2' but it was recognised that some applicants might not have that standard of education implicating the need for 'a degree of built-in flexibility in terms of content, structure, level and delivery' (Course discussion document, 2001). Reflecting this view the college prospectus states that 'guidance, counselling and study support are available' and also emphasises that 'no specific entry or educational requirements' are necessary for entry to the course. These examples show a construction of the adult returner in need of these additional supports because of their lack of educational qualifications.

The idea of 'open entry' to the course raises particular issues and challenges for learners and tutors notably in relation to the provision of supports for students. Open entry is in keeping with the stated mission of the college to 'promote Access to Further and Higher Education for mature students' (college

prospectus) yet must be considered against the very real academic demands of the course. For example, FETAC Level 5 module descriptors suggest a preferred entry level of 'National Vocational Certificate Level 1, Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualifications and/or relevant life experience' but the decision regarding entry level is left ultimately up to the provider. However the desire to offer someone a place on the course has to be balanced with a moral duty for that person's welfare. This is also raised in O'Brien and O'Fathaigh's (2007, p174) study where a further education provider stressed that despite the pressure on colleges to recruit students adult education staff were careful to refer adult learners to other programmes (e.g. FETAC Level 4 or literacy support) if they felt they were not ready for the demands of FETAC Level 5. Similarly the ambiguity around entry requirements in the return to education course led to tension as this extract from an interim evaluation report shows:

It is apparent that the relatively loose selection process has brought with it certain challenges, particularly in terms of individuals with low levels of previous education. Notwithstanding these students appear to be managing and availing of high supports such as literacy.

(Interim evaluation report, 2002)

I argue that open entry should not mean setting somebody up for failure and in the interviews I discuss the implications of open entry for expectations of and supports for adult learners; the pressures it can place on both learners (in relation to the effects on their confidence and the pressure to succeed) and tutors (in terms of time and resources for individual learners) and the wider issue of managing and facilitating learning in the class group. The next section considers the inclusion from the beginning of study skills as one of the main in-built supports in the adult learner curriculum.

Study skills

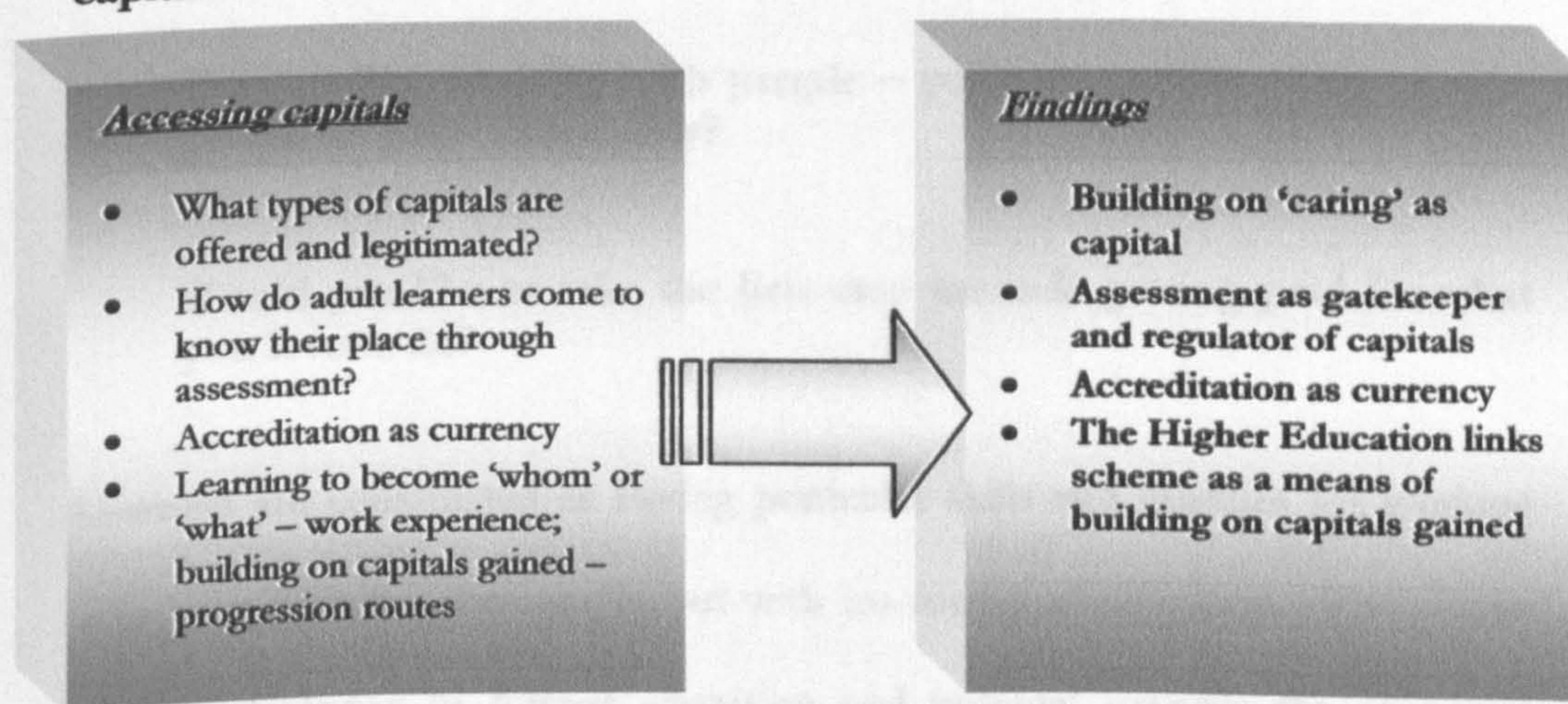
Study skills classes were included as an integral part of the adult learner curriculum on the basis that many adult learners harbour anxieties around study and academic work particularly because of past educational experiences. These fears are well documented in the literature, for example (Bowl, 2003; Bamber and Tett, 1999, 2000). The capitals available to students through acquiring the practices of assignment work and academic writing are those that they need in order to progress with the course, gain accreditation and greater access to symbolic and cultural capitals. They are essential practices to acquire in order to fit into the learning culture of the course.

The aim of the study skills class was to help learners cope with returning to education and to offer 'mentoring, tutorials, one to one support, one to one feedback' (Course planning document, 2000). An interim course evaluation noted that the 'additional support provided by the study skills module was thought to be invaluable, particularly in the light of the fact that for many of the participants it had been a number of years since they had been involved in education'. However attendance records showed somewhat erratic attendance patterns for the subject. This raises the question as to whether learners are using it strategically attending only when they need particular support. Therefore in the interview questions with learners and tutors I explore the ways in which adult learners perceive and use the study skills class, the purpose that it serves in the curriculum and its role in facilitating learners gain access to more significant capitals.

Summary

Emphasis on provision of supports for adult learners is highlighted amongst others by McGivney (1996); Kember (1995) cited in McGivney (1996); Macdonald and Stratta (1998), Bamber and Tett (1999, 2000). The course aimed to provide a range of supports for adult learners based on the assumption that adult learners need them in order to make the transition back to formal education. A largely 'open entry' policy in the return to education course was not unproblematic and further highlighted the need for key supports for adult learners. The next section explores the types of capitals the course affords to adult learners and the ways in which the curriculum seeks to offer them.

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital?



According to Bourdieu different individuals come into a field with different awareness of the 'rules of the game' and this awareness along with learners' ability and capacity to negotiate and manipulate the rules depends not only on their habitus but also on the types of capital they bring to that field. As O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2007, p123) observe all forms of capital '(economic, social,

cultural and symbolic) constitute key factors that define positions and possibilities for individuals engaged in education'. The curriculum seeks to offer adult learners access to more privileged forms of capital in the form of the symbolic capital of accreditation, the cultural capital of the knowledge recognised and valued in higher education and the social capital of the social networks of relationships built in the college and, for example, through work experience.

Building on 'caring' as capital

The return to education course is positioned as a route towards the accreditation that can open up greater employment and educational chances. For example, the inside cover page of the information leaflet for the course poses the following questions:

Do you like working with people – younger people, older people, people in your community?

Would you like to take the first step towards getting paid for what you love to do?

Learners are constructed as having particular skills and qualities for working with people in the community but with no formal qualification. The course offers a 'gateway to further education and training' towards the economic capital of being paid for what they 'already love to do'. Learners are also offered the opportunity to access the capitals of relevant knowledge (i.e. the 'right' knowledge) and skills to enter employment or continue education. This is pertinent in relation to one of Weil and McGill's (1989) cited in Jarvis (2004, p91) four 'villages' (i.e. meanings and purposes) of experiential learning where

adult learners' prior experiential learning is harnessed for assessment and accreditation purposes. There are also similarities here with Skeggs' study of working class women on caring courses. In her study, caring is 'a cultural resource' that the women in her study had access to, a form of cultural capital (Skeggs (1997, p58). In the light of this one of the mandatory modules³¹ aims 'to develop in learners a range of personal and interpersonal qualities necessary for work in a variety of care environments'. The learner is positioned as someone who needs to develop and build on the qualities necessary to become the right person for the job. In the interviews I explore the idea of 'whom' or 'what' we are educating adult learners to be by questioning the different emphasis tutors and managers place on vocational education and liberal education and which is offered greater significance.

Learners bring skills and qualities to the course that are recognised as a form of capital that can be built on but one that needs to be authorised and legitimated through education and accreditation. O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2007, p121) studied adult learners in different educational settings in Ireland³² and found that returning to education for some learners was triggered by their realisation that people with a qualification were being paid to do the exact same community work that they were doing on a voluntary basis. They experienced what O'Brien and O'Fathaigh describe as 'credential pressure' to undertake accredited courses to legitimate themselves. In order to gain economic capital for the work they did on a voluntary basis they needed the symbolic capital of accreditation. Similarly in this study, many community education courses in the local area were not accredited and by opening up the opportunity to gain a

³¹ FETAC Care Provision and Practice

³² Community, further and higher education

FETAC qualification the course sought to offer learners the symbolic capital of accreditation. As Kelly (1994, p2) explains accreditation ‘ascribes value to the work, confers status, and reflects that certain standards of attainment or skill or learning have been reached, verified and appropriately rewarded’.

Assessment as a gatekeeper

Assessment is one of the main ways through which legitimate capitals are accessed. Tranter (2006, p3) notes that in education ‘qualifications are the capital (the ‘prize’) in the game’ and this capital is regulated by schools and universities. She explains this occurs through determining ‘what knowledge is considered ‘legitimate’ and by ensuring the reproduction of that knowledge through the allocation of grades and qualifications (Oakley and Pudsey, 1997)’. In the adult learner curriculum the capitals at stake are the symbolic capital of the FETAC award and the cultural capital of the academic knowledge recognised in higher education.

To facilitate accreditation for learners the return to education course has to operate within FETAC curricular and assessment requirements³³. As O’Brien and O’Fathaigh note FETAC criteria determine the ‘nature, pace and perceived quality of the workload’ and the option for learners to ‘self-pace’ is therefore limited and as noted by Usher et al (2002, p79) ‘pre-defined knowledge and skills’ can impact on the influence of the socio-cultural dimensions of learning.

³³The college is not a centre for State examinations therefore FETAC Level 5 accreditation had to be offered as the awards offered by the other accrediting bodies for which the college is registered are all at Level 6

FETAC assessment is outcome based and criterion referenced and all FETAC modules offer a range of different assessment techniques and assessment methods (Appendix 8). FETAC modules state:

To enable all learners to demonstrate that they have reached the required standard, candidate evidence may be submitted in written, oral, visual, multimedia or other format as appropriate to the learning outcomes

This should afford the opportunity for all learners to access accreditation through a diversity of assessment methods. Nevertheless it raises questions for interview as to the different ways learners and tutors legitimate alternative forms of assessment and the implications of alternative forms of assessment in relation to progression to higher education where the predominant methods of assessment are written essays and examinations which are limited in the majority of FETAC modules.

Accreditation as currency

Analysis of selected documentary data showed the different ways in which accreditation was afforded significance. FETAC documentation positions the Level 5 award as a nationally recognised qualification located at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). FETAC awards are authenticated through an external moderation process³⁴ where candidates' work and tutors' grading are monitored and assessed by centrally appointed external examiners. The FETAC mission statement clearly sets out the aim for all FETAC awards to have legitimate currency for progression for learners.

³⁴ From 1 July 2008 all registered providers are required to have quality assured procedures in place to plan, oversee, verify and authenticate the assessment process

FETAC's mission is to make quality assured awards in accordance with national standards within the national framework, creating opportunities for all learners in further education and training to have their achievements recognised and providing access to systematic progression pathways.

(www.fetac.ie)

Course development and planning material showed the focus on accreditation as capital and currency for learners. For example, one of the key objectives of the course was to 'ensure progression routes from the course into either employment or ongoing education/training' (Course planning document, 2000). The interim evaluation report showed that learners were aware of the symbolic capital to be gained through accreditation:

...aspirations and perceptions regarding progression routes varied considerably depending on the individuals involved. In general, it was believed that the accreditation of the course was invaluable as it not only contributed to a sense of achievement but also opened up the progression options of the participants. For a number of participants the course is considered as a stepping stone to higher education and for others, it has made them aware of areas of employment options that would interest them

(Interim evaluation report, 2002)

Analysis of the college promotional literature showed how emphasis on accreditation differed across the texts and the changes that have occurred over the years. For example, the course information leaflet poses the question:

Do you simply want to get back to learning, start nurturing your natural talents and abilities, take time to develop your full potential?

This invites interest from prospective participants who may not feel they wish to work towards a full qualification but who still wish to return to learning.

Between 2002 and 2006 the college prospectus reflected a similar flexibility:

If the student wishes she/he may enter for awards certified by FETAC, or choose not to take any examination but enjoy the experience of acquiring new skills and knowledge

But the following year that text was replaced with:

The course offers students the opportunity to achieve a FETAC Level 5 award

The change in wording in the college prospectus reflects a growing emphasis on accreditation as capital and the course as the opportunity for learners to access that capital. In the interviews I pose questions around the extent to which an increasing emphasis on accreditation drives the teaching, learning and assessment processes and the types of pressures this can exert on learners and tutors.

Building on capital gained - the Higher Education Links Scheme

The course seeks to offer learners the cultural capital of academic knowledge necessary for higher education. The development of the NFQ and the Higher Education Links Scheme in recent years offers holders of a FETAC Level 5 award the opportunity to enter the higher education system. Firstly, learners can use their FETAC Level 5 award through the Higher Education Links Scheme to apply for places in higher education through the Central Applications Office (CAO)³⁵. Specific courses have a quota of places reserved for FETAC students and generally the FETAC award must be in a cognate discipline to the HE course applied for. Secondly, in 2006 a pilot scheme was introduced where FETAC students could apply for Level 6 (higher certificate) or Level 7 (ordinary degree) in eighteen higher education institutes but in

³⁵ CAO – the organisation given responsibility by the higher education institutes in Ireland for the central processing of all first year applicants for undergraduate courses

competition with Leaving Certificate students. However FETAC students are not restricted in their course choices. Points are awarded for different FETAC Level 5 grades³⁶. Mature students³⁷ are also eligible to apply directly to higher education and since the beginning of the course more than half of those graduating have continued on to Level 6 or Level 7 courses compared with one quarter who have taken up employment.

In the college prospectus, the 'graduate profiles' are advanced as the 'success stories' of the course. Analysis of the college prospectus from 2002 to 2008 shows that the graduate students profiled³⁸ have always been students who have gone on to higher education thus giving greater significance to using capitals gained to progress to higher education rather than accessing employment. In the interviews with tutors and learners I pose questions around the different emphasis given in the course to the types of capital on offer and the ways in which different progression routes are perceived and legitimated.

Summary

The course offers opportunities for learners to acquire more privileged forms of capital access to which are regulated through the processes of assessment and accreditation. The symbolic capital of accreditation offers greater employment chances. The higher education links scheme and the recognition of FETAC awards on the NFQ offer learners the opportunity to use the cultural capital gained in the return to education course to access higher education.

³⁶ Distinction – 50 points; Merit – 35 points; Pass – 20 points

³⁷ Over 23 years

³⁸ The graduate profiles analysed were those for the Return to Education course only

Chapter summary

This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the findings from the documentary data followed by a list of questions arising from these findings that will be taken up in the following chapter.

The documentary data showed a construction of the prospective adult learner as an early school leaver with few educational qualifications, likely to be female and with family and childcare commitments (multiple roles/identities). That learner is also seen as ‘in need’ of a support driven learning environment. FETAC curricular documentation gives legitimacy to technical knowledge and skills whereas analysis of the curriculum development and selected texts for the Human Growth and Development module shows that theoretical knowledge is privileged. The course seeks to offer adult learners more privileged forms of capital through assessment, FETAC accreditation and transition to higher education via the higher education links scheme.

Table 4.5 on the following page outlines the questions for interview arising from the analysis of the documentary data in this chapter.

Questions arising from the analysis of the documentary data

- How do particular aspirational myths of adult learner identity impact on the support practices and to what extent do these practices foster autonomy or dependency in the light of these constructions?
- To what extent are non-accredited subjects given legitimacy in the curriculum and what is their future in a changing curriculum? What types of knowledge are given legitimacy over others in the curriculum?
- What are the implications of 'open entry' to the course in terms of demands on learners and tutors, the implications for support practices evaluation of selection procedures?
- How does an increasing emphasis on accreditation influence support and assessment practices in the course and what legitimacy is given by educators to the different forms of capital accessible through the course and its progression routes?

Table 4.5

The next chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured individual and focus group interview with adult learners, tutors and managers.

Chapter 5 – The co-construction of aspirational behaviours

...all at once adult learners are involved in relationships with the following:

- with staff who will differ greatly in their personal stances towards different kinds of students;
- with a particular programme and the complexities of an area of academic study;
- with varying priorities and approaches either at odds with or congruent with their entering concerns and expectations;
- with implicit values and meanings deeply embedded in the histories and cultures of particular disciplines, departments and institutions;
- with different languages and assumptions about education and learning

Weil (1989, p137)

Introduction

St Clair (2004, p81-82) conceptualises the aspirational myth as an 'idealised identity co-created by learners and instructors' and as 'the story of success that guides the learning taking place with adult education programmes'. Co-constructing practices are those day to day practices and interactions between learners, tutors and managers through which the notion of the idealised adult learner is transmitted.

Chapter 4 identified points of tension arising from the analysis and findings from the documentary data relating to interests and assumptions underpinning the development and espoused delivery of the adult learner curriculum. This analysis raised further questions for the semi-structured interviews regarding the implications of these tensions for the enacted and experienced curriculum. In this chapter I present the findings from the semi-structured individual interviews and the focus group interviews and I use the framework model (Figure 5.1) to structure the discussion of the findings. Drawing on the theoretical framework, critical reading of the literature and the research

questions the left-hand side of the model offers the questions that guide the analysis of the data to illuminate the key research questions:

1. In what ways does the notion of an aspirational myth of the 'adult learner' illuminate the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme
2. What types of knowledge are deemed valid and legitimate in the adult learner curriculum?
3. In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital?
4. Through which practices in the educational institution are desired aspirational behaviours co-constructed?

This chapter is organised into four main sections with the final section subdivided into four parts to allow for greater clarity of presentation. The right hand side of the curriculum model (Figure 5.1) presents the key headings around which the findings are discussed. These headings relate to the themes arising from the thematic analysis of the interview data which was informed by Bourdieu's analytical tools of capital, habitus and field and St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth, the theoretical and empirical literature and the key research questions in this study.

The case study of the adult learner curriculum – a framework for interrogation

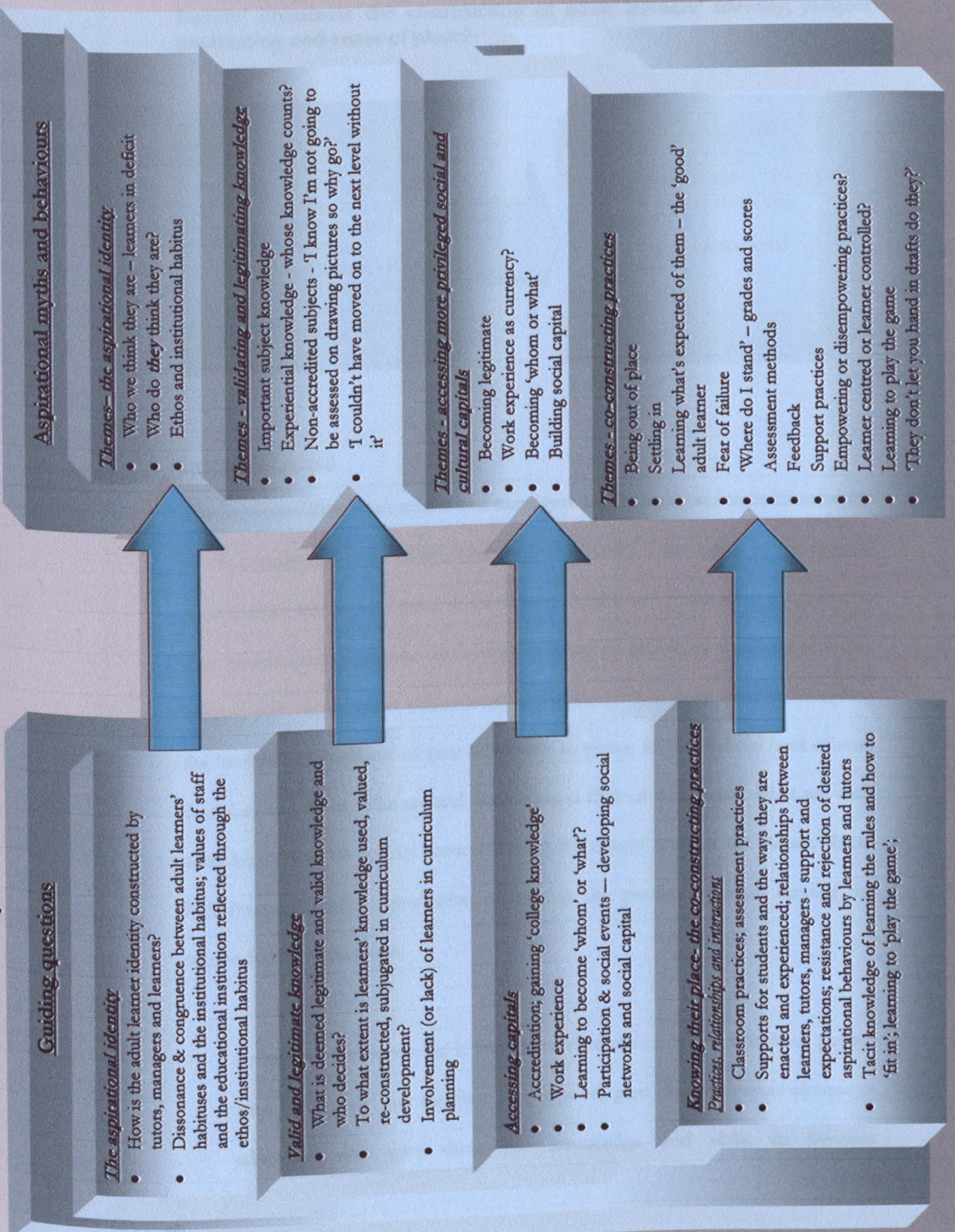
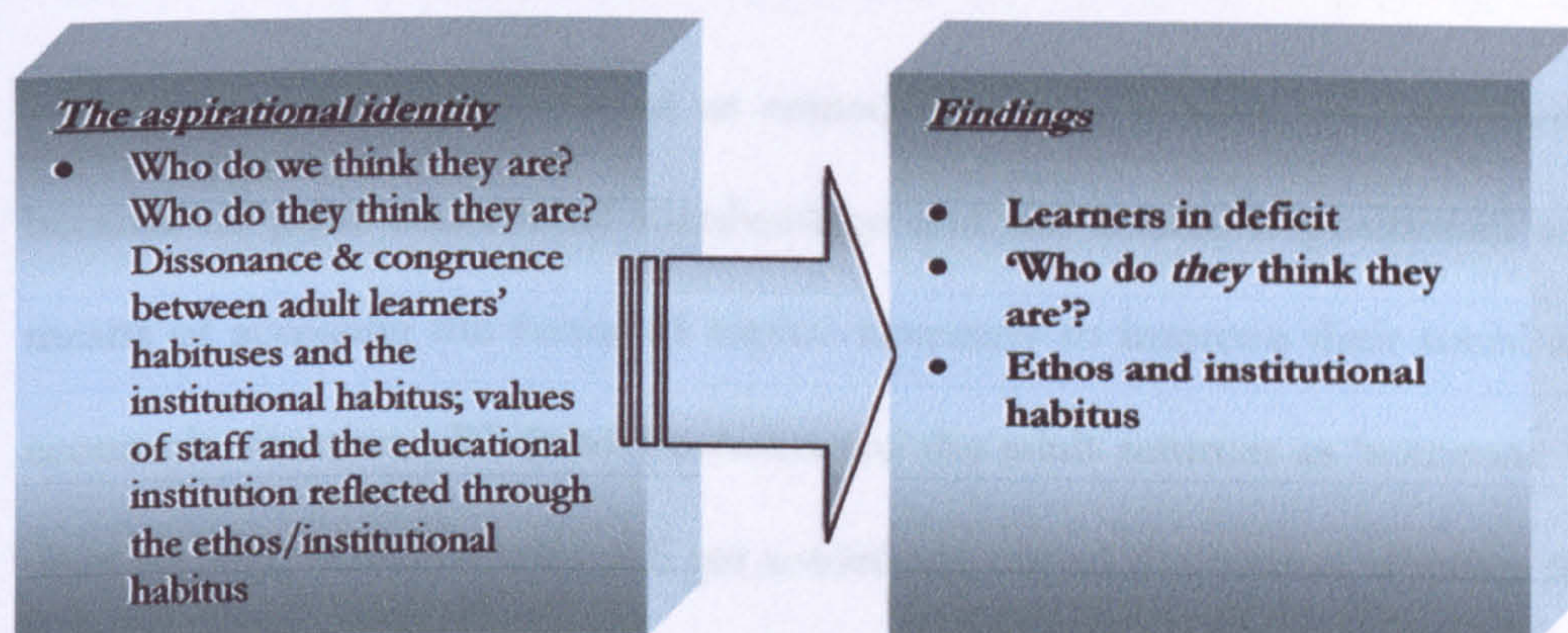


Figure 5.1

In what ways does the notion of an aspirational myth of the 'adult learner' illuminate the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place?



Learners in deficit

The interview data from tutors and managers highlighted two main dimensions to the conceptualisation of the adult learner identity. One relates to the type of adult learner whom we expect to come into the return to education programme. This construction positions the learner in terms of deficit, as someone who has 'missed out' on previous educational experiences. Learners want to complete the 'unfinished business' of past education to prove to themselves (and others) that they can do it. The second dimension is that of whom and what we wish adult learners to be and to become during the course and for the future. Here R12 (manager) talks about what he saw as the particular vision driving the course from its inception:

I suppose our hopes for it were sort of to take a whole bunch of people who had missed out the first time around, give them a second chance at education and give them the knowledge and skills to become

eh...effective contributors in the whole community...eh....social services,
social area of work

Here the learner is constructed as someone lacking in skills and knowledge because of prior educational disadvantage and the course is positioned as a means of accessing the forms of capital necessary to improve their social and economic situation. R7 (tutor) constructed the adult returner as 'someone we want to help, someone who will get something out of the course, whether that be a sense of achievement because maybe they have suffered in the past from educational experiences.' R1 (tutor) felt there wasn't a 'typical profile' of adult learner identity yet articulated a particular expectation of where (reflecting a particular habitus) she thinks those learners are coming from:

but I think in the norm that I expect them to be probably of working class background, that they...you know that they come from a variety of different sort of maybe occupational fields and...you see them very much as a kind of a product of all that's gone on in their lives that they tell you about

R12's response also reflects this idea of a differential in habitus:

the profile of our student...the profile we were funded on³⁹ isn't quite the profile that we get in here...when they come back to us in their thirties and forties or even their fifties, they have a lifetime at this stage of...eh, sort of exclusion from education

³⁹ Further education courses are part-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and part State funded

'Who do *they* think they are?'

Learners constructed their identities as adult learners returning to education around different beliefs and expectations of both themselves and the educational setting they were coming back to and the influence of prior educational experiences. R4 thought that she would be expected to 'pick things up much quicker...I thought I would have been expected to know more because I was an adult with more life experience'. R24 (focus group) spent the first year 'completely afraid of doing things wrong' and worrying that she'd always have to have the right answer afraid that, 'I couldn't say 'I don't know'.

Learners drew on past experiences of school as a referent. R21 thought she'd be asked to read aloud in class, 'I thought I'd have to learn things off by heart and that next day they'd go around you know, one by one'. R14 described how she 'was called a goody-goody in school because I knew the answers but I was made fun of so I dumbed myself down and acted stupid and left school at fifteen and went straight out working'.

Some learners spoke of their own expectations and identified changes they wanted to make in their lives in terms of status (gaining qualifications and employment) and wanting to 'make something of themselves'. Their lack of qualifications meant they were restricted to low pay, low status jobs. They saw the course as a means of changing this and of changing themselves. As R14 commented 'I don't want to be asking 'have you got a club card?' all my life'. R10 compared herself with younger students in terms of her own perceived lack of achievement:

...they're only coming out of school and they have their Leaving Cert and I've a nine year old child and I've nothing. I don't mean that I've a nine year old...I'm delighted to have him but like no certificates

In the study many adult learners juggled multiple roles/identities in their lives of which the identity of 'student' was only one of many. Blaxter and Tight (1994, p178) also found that adult learners were 'juggling with time, endeavouring to keep a range of responsibilities going in addition to their studies'. As R17 observed that 'there's so much going on in our lives...probably carrying a lot more baggage than the normal student would here'. R14 felt the course allowed her to be a student as well as a parent, 'in work as a single parent with a child, I was a problem but here I'm not'. R3 (manager) acknowledged the 'balancing act' representative of many adult learners' lives and observed that certain allowances should be made for them because, 'they can get caught on both sides, with other responsibilities and baggage that's outside of the norm' because of their family responsibilities.

Ethos and institutional habitus

In the study ethos and culture are used to reflect and illuminate the institutional habitus and in the data the course planning documents showed a particular espoused adult education ethos that was to drive the enactment and delivery of the course. This ethos was articulated as 'bottom up rather than top down, a partnership of equals with students and teachers developing the course together' drawing on an 'experiential methodology based on the assumptions that students already have what they need to learn and that much of the content can be drawn from their life experience' (Course planning document, 2001).

Smith (2003, p466) defines the ethos of an educational setting as 'a characteristic of a school...as a complex dynamic interaction of a continuous construction and re-construction of individuals' and institutions' habituses – a perpetual 'construction' site'.

The ethos towards adult learners in the college, although difficult to define, was largely seen to be supportive by learners, tutors and managers. As R7 (tutor) observed, 'there isn't a written ethos that I know of in regards to adult learners....so therefore the ethos would come from the staff'. He felt the ethos was 'to be as helpful as possible...as patient as possible'. R6 commented that 'a sort of culture has crept up amongst ourselves, like amongst the staff, a certain way of dealing with them and it's not very explicit...but it's there'. R16 felt that the ethos was experienced and transmitted differently across different programmes and course teams, 'I think within the teams there's big differentials... I think it's quite variable though over different teachers as there is no stated policy or stated ethos or forum in which to look at that'. R3 (manager) noted that tutors subscribed differently to the ethos:

when you do break that barrier and you do get them in, well then you do need a special type of teacher that...treats them as adults, more importantly treats them as mature adults or older adults. But there are other teachers who...well they don't have the right training or they're the wrong personality or don't buy into the ethos of working with the adult

The idea of a situated and contextualised institutional habitus in different colleges is reflected by R3 (manager), 'there are some colleges where the adult

course as it were is just another course and...the same level of support, the same level of welcome, the same level, the same ethos wouldn't be there'.

The ethos towards adult learners was found embedded in learners' interactions with staff throughout the college. R10 described it as 'like your second home. You get to know people even to the people out at the desk you know the caretakers...when you're walking in 'good morning, they're so genuine ...you get to know them and they get to know you and it's like a second family'. R3 (manager) observed that the adult education ethos had to be transmitted by:

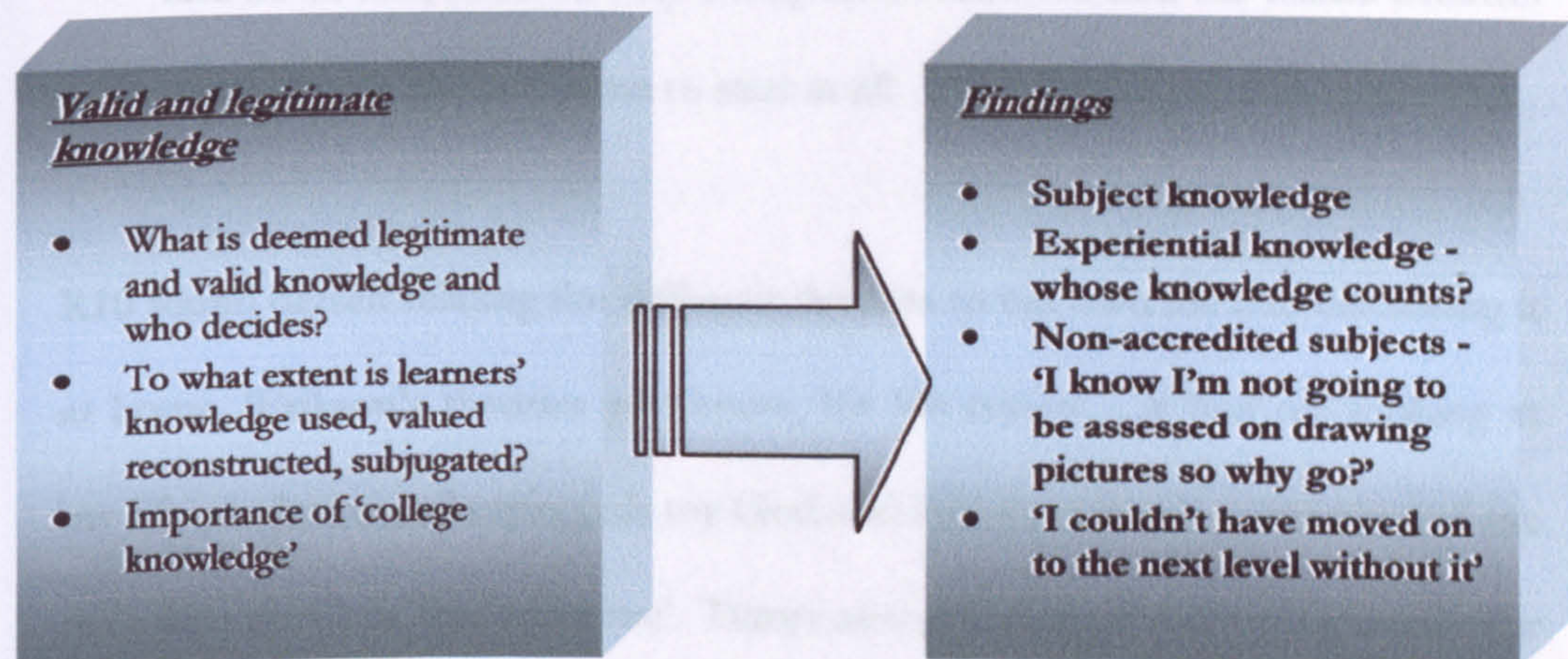
everybody else that's around the place...that the student meets whether it is the guy at the door or the cleaner or the receptionist or the secretary or like the person cleaning the toilet. If those people are buying into the kind of ethos...and being helpful or supportive to the adult that makes the college more welcoming, more supportive, eh, a better place for that student

Summary

The data highlighted different conceptualisations of the aspirational identity of the adult learner in the responses of learners and tutors with a common theme that of educational deficit and lack of cultural and symbolic capital. Learners' constructions of themselves reflected the influence of early school experiences, feelings of being an 'impostor' and doubting their ability to stay the course. Both learners and tutors felt that there was a distinctive supportive ethos towards adult learners in the college but tutors found the largely emanated from

staff themselves as there was no stated adult education policy regarding the ways in which tutors should work with adult learners.

What knowledges are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult learner curriculum?



Learners, tutors and managers all had different ideas about the types of knowledges deemed to be important to learn and acquire in order to 'fit in'. These knowledges included subject and discipline knowledge, applied knowledge and skills, vocational knowledge and knowledge related to learners' personal development.

Subject knowledge

Although most of the adult learners interviewed felt the theoretical subjects e.g. Human Growth and Development, Social Studies, Legal Studies were the most important subjects in the curriculum they did not discount the importance of skills development through subjects such as Personal and Interpersonal Skills for example. Human Growth and Development was deemed important as it gave them a background in developmental psychology that was necessary for

future study. R8 felt that gave her a head start when she moved on to a higher level course:

like all I did with you in the first year came in very handy then when I started doing it this year with _____. All the different theorists, Freud and all of that, came in very handy all of that. We had the basics whereas some people like had none to start at all

R10 found herself relating the different theories to her own life and discussing it at home, 'Erikson's theories you know, his life review...it had me looking at my life you know and saying, oh my God and I'd be reading it to me ma and me ma's like 'oh God, that's like me'. Tutors also saw this subject as important for learners. R7 felt that it was important for learners to have 'the basics of psychology particularly for going on, they need it for higher level'.

For R9 the role plays in Personal and Interpersonal Skills were important in helping her change her views, 'she gave us little role play things you know, pretending we were refugees coming into this country and the way it felt for them...and em...it made me open my eyes, it really did change like that'. This extract shows that for R9 this particular class changed her way of thinking. In the light of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning R9 has reassessed a previously negative frame of reference about refugees and transformed her way of thinking.

Whose knowledge counts?

Many adult learners interviewed expressed uncertainty around knowing when their own experiential knowledge was deemed useful and important and when it

was not. Although many tutors drew on learners' life experiences in class in order to give them a framework for understanding learners found it difficult not to bring in personal opinions and experiences into assignment work. R7 described the approach that he used:

...if you're being too orthodox...you're leaving some out because...being orthodox is what the other forms of education are that have let them down in the past so you need to...allow them to...give examples from their own life especially when you're teaching anything to do with Human Growth and Development or Social Studies they make connections with their own lives...you get them being able to contextualise the ideas

R16 used the life experiences of learners in class to help them realise and validate that experiential knowledge:

I would kind of do of a small bit of teaching and then in groups get them to explore whatever it is... because they're adults especially, and because they have such experience...they probably have cared for somebody, they have that, so I encourage them to draw...those strands together that...maybe people who have been bringing up children...there's people that have cared for an elderly relative or whatever...but em for them to draw on those experiences and then to marry the two to say the theory

This extract from R16 exemplifies Illeris's (2007, p84) observation that in adult education experiential learning is generally perceived in relation to application and recognition of 'students' prior informal learning' but in opposition to 'school learning'. Here R16 uses learners' experiences to enable them to learn

and apply different theories. However although learners appreciated the ways in which the classes drew on their own experiences and opinions, difficulties became evident when they grappled with academic writing and learning the discourse necessary for assignments and projects. At times this led to confusion and frustration. As R23 (focus group) commented, 'say in a question like you're asked to criticise a theory or something, Freud or someone, well to me that's saying what I think is wrong with that theory. But I can't say I think he's a weirdo...I'm not supposed to write what *I* think'.

'I know I'm not going to be assessed on drawing pictures so why go?'

All the learners interviewed in the study came to know the different subjects and knowledges that were legitimated in the adult learner curriculum. For example R8 picked up on what was deemed important from the attitude of tutors, 'you needed the grades for most of them, like the teachers let you know and they are all serious and you have assignments for them and I mean you have to be there'. She explained how learners identified the subjects not considered important:

We knew that they were only fillers, they were just there for the sake of it. Like we had maths and that was taken away. We had English, we had history, then we had art. We knew things like that were only fillers, like they weren't important subjects

R11 described the value her class group attached to the non-accredited subjects:

Crap, crap. 'Don't bother going'. 'I'm going home early', 'are you coming for a cup of tea', 'are you going down to the canteen', 'Ah we've only art, it doesn't matter', like it's not important. You know I'm not going to be assessed on drawing pictures so why go? I'm going to go home

She elaborated saying, 'if people know that you're doing a subject that has to be assessed they most definitely will be in the class more so than the ones that aren't because they're not important really'. R15 explained how attendance had changed for one class when learners realised it was accredited, 'when people find out that they're going to get accreditation...some sort of award for a subject, then they put their minds to it and they make sure that they're there...I've seen a change in M's class, when they heard that about it they started to show up'.

Tutors and managers were aware of low attendance and lack of value afforded by learners to non-accredited subjects. R12 (manager) observed:

...for whatever reason, they treat that part of their time here as less important than the assessed, accredited learning...they see the Return to Education largely in material terms of, 'I want to acquire additional knowledge and skills that will give me eh, a better chance of a better job'

R12's response could be seen in the light of adult learners' resistance to and even rejection of the non-accredited subjects as a strategy enabling them to focus on acquiring the qualification and ignoring anything deemed superfluous. R16 agreed, 'there's always the attempt to offer students subjects that are

outside of FETAC but then unfortunately those often play second fiddle to what they quickly identify as the important subjects and again it's I suppose reflecting the emphasis on accreditation'.

'I couldn't have moved on to the next level without it'

The knowledges gained in the return to education course proved invaluable for learners making the transition to higher level courses (Level 6 and 7). These knowledges included subject knowledge, academic practices and the knowledge they gained about themselves. R8 described the advantage to her:

It was definitely of benefit because it got us used to the whole structure of doing assignments, going to college, being in, following the time table. And then we had the basics then from the classes like yours ...like I know a couple of girls in my class say they're like in their 20's and 30's and they just came straight back...and they found it very hard they probably would have liked to have done something to give you at least the start, getting a routine going

R13 also felt the course prepared her well, 'I would never have been able to go into the diploma without this course...I wouldn't have known how to do an assignment and after doing the assignments, the Social Studies and Human Growth and Development assignments, those kind of things bring you on further'. In the light of these examples R16's comment regarding support for adult learners is relevant:

I think I've changed my expectations...I think I probably would have moved a little bit from feeling that em....that huge allowances should be

made to now maybe feeling that you know...towards the position that I'm encouraging them in more independence in...simply because of the fact that I've kind of observed over the years that when students progress on that they find it difficult then when they're in the mainstream

Learners sometimes did not value particular subjects in the adult learner curriculum but later realised their benefit. R8 described her experiences of Teamworking, 'it's just like we used to say, we used to call the class 'groupy hug' and all with _____ and then we realised it is useful and it is important and you do need them skills'. R4 commented on what she found helpful in her employment:

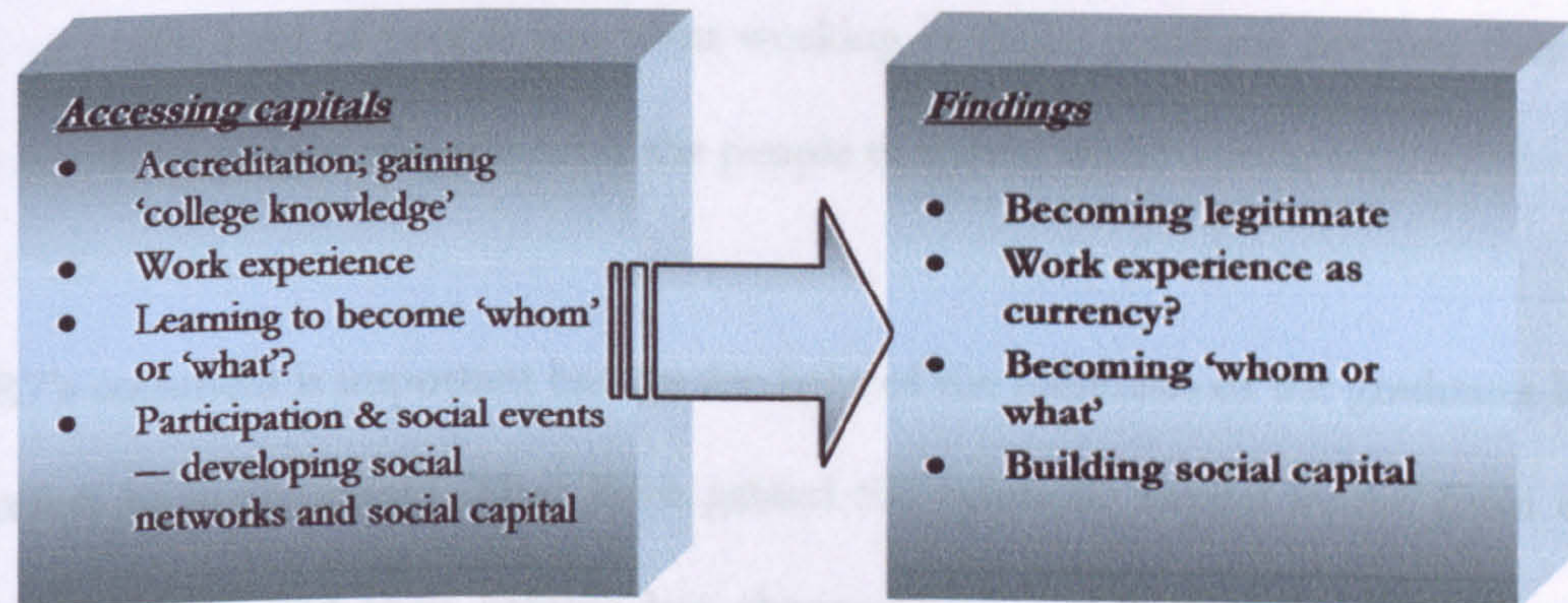
I learned how to approach people when you're trying to help them to do something...because your approach is what puts them at ease and leaves them open to learn something. So I learned that here, by watching people...watching how you dealt with people. How you didn't choke somebody that was driving you up the walls...you need patience for that but you also need people skills so you can kind of steer people off a subject or on to a subject...so I was a people watcher...the stuff I learned here, I use in my job

Summary

The findings show that learners and tutors awarded greater legitimacy to theoretical knowledge and FETAC accredited subjects over non-accredited subjects. Although tutors drew on learners' experiential knowledge in class many learners found it difficult not to bring in their own opinions and

experience in assignments. Adult learners who progressed on to higher level courses recognised the importance of different knowledges gained on the course for making the transition to the next level of study.

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital?



Becoming legitimate

Most of the learners and tutors interviewed highlighted the importance of accreditation. Some learners attached great importance to the currency of the qualification and what they would be qualified to 'be'. For R9 doing the course meant that:

I feel that I can work at what I want to work at now because I've got the...well, I hope I have the certificate...because you need that to work at, you know the skills, work with young people or special needs and that, or I could work with old people as well. So...I hope that I've got the thing at the end of it to say that I can work at it

R7 (tutor) commented on the achievements of some of the graduates from the course:

you would actually see some of the adult learners that we had in the past now actually have key jobs in the community like working for different welfare services, working as civil servants and public servants. There's no greater feeling than that because before that their lives would have been dealing with social workers, dealing with the local (*name of local service*) and now they're actually working in those positions and they're the, exactly the right kind of people you want working in those positions because they'll have proper empathy with the people they deal with

R7's comment is important here in the light of the habituses of the graduates he refers to in the quote. They have gained the symbolic capital in the form of accreditation and their habitus has changed as a result of that. Yet by not leaving the field of disadvantage, albeit now employed in it rather than as a client, how far have they have moved on? R7's comment that those graduates are 'exactly the right people' could also be seen in the light of Colley et al's (2002, 2003) conceptualisation of vocational habitus as 'the combination of idealised and realised dispositions to which students must orient themselves in order to become 'the right sort of person for the job' (Colley et al, 2002, p4).

For R1 (tutor) the course was important as a stepping stone but not necessarily into the caring profession:

...I think it gives them a taste of education and eh...quite often they'll choose different things which are...you know...outside of the social care qualifications and that's very important...even just in recent experience now...people who come back in and they realise quite early on or maybe

into the first year...this isn't the (right) course or I took a safe route because I've been caring for someone all my life...I should have done x, y or z and I think it's just a matter of confidence, getting themselves back in, they get over that hurdle

It is interesting to note that she sees some learners taking a caring course because it is a safe route; it is something that is familiar to them. This is evident in Skeggs's (1997, p58) study when she notes that 'caring is something they will be able to do and 'something at which they are unlikely to fail'. R1's idea of the course acting as a potential springboard towards work or study unrelated to the familiarity of caring is supported by R5 (focus group). She realised that social care work was not for her and used her profile of results to successfully apply for a higher level course in another discipline. She explained, 'I want to finish the course to get the qualification but it's helped to realise that I want something different'.

R16 queried the wisdom of too strong an emphasis on accreditation:

'I'm not denigrating accreditation and for some people it is hugely important but the focus is much more on the attainment of the criteria...the space for looking at a topic and subject and taking your time for students to mull over it and discuss it...that window of opportunity for that type of activity is definitely being minimised'.

Work experience as currency?

The data showed that learners perceived the relevance and currency of the work experience in different ways. R4 hadn't been in a work situation for thirty years

and found it important because, 'you know everything has changed so much since I was working, laws and everything like that I hadn't a clue what to expect so it was really invaluable'. For R11 the work placement helped her realise the area she did *not* want to work in, 'I went off and worked in the nursery, that's something I would not work in and I wouldn't have known that unless I done me work placement. That was a lesson to be learnt'.

Many of the learners interviewed chose work placement in areas with which they were already familiar for example, childcare and care of the elderly. R20 (focus group) chose to work with elderly people because 'I've done this before, I've taken care of older people...I enjoy it and it won't be new to me'. Her decision to stick with that which was familiar meant that she was using capital she already possessed, something she already knew. This can be seen in the light of Skeggs (1997) who found the women in her study drew on caring as 'a form of cultural capital' that they already had access to. R1 (tutor) felt that for some learners focusing on caring because of its familiarity to them might not be such a good idea. She wondered if 'a broader approach, away from the focus on the caring type of setting' might be more beneficial.

R21 worked with elderly people in a residential home which was something she had never done. She reported feeling 'exhausted' at the end of the work placement, had really enjoyed working with elderly people, had 'learned how to do hospital bed corners but I didn't feel intellectually challenged at all. I couldn't see why you'd need a FETAC Level 5 to do the work I was doing'. R21's comment suggests that the capital gained through the qualification was not really necessary for this sort of care work and this is also reflected by

Somerville (2006, p473), citing the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (2003), who noted that 'in the past, 'kindness and a strong back were seen to be the main requirements for working in nursing homes'.

Becoming 'whom' or 'what'?

Learners, tutors and managers had different aspirations for adult learners during and as a result of the process of returning to education. All of the learners interviewed felt that coming back to education had changed them not only in relation to gaining the qualification but also in their outlook on life, their confidence and their personal growth and achievement. R11 described how she had changed personally, 'I think now, to be really honest I believe I would have been fairly racist and prejudiced and I just feel like from doing that course that it probably opened my mind just a bit more...so I think that has been a real gift'. R11's observation here has credence in the light of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Here she recognises how her previous discriminatory and prejudiced way of thinking has changed through her engagement with both the academic and social learning practices in class and within her learning community.

R15 described how she had changed in herself as a result of doing the course:

I do notice a change. I find I'm not chatting at home about things that don't matter any more, do you know what I mean? My husband said to me 'there's not many people ringing on the phone anymore, why's that?' you know somebody would say to me something and say well I'll ring you back and let you know what's happening and I'm not really interested anymore, it's not important....it's wasting time

These examples also show a change in learners' habituses from when they started on the course. For R15 her habitus has changed in relation to those of her friends and there is a sense of disjuncture evident as she has moved away from things that were once important. She has sacrificed the social capital of her former network of friends as a result of gaining increased cultural capital.

Tutors and managers often had different aspirations for adult learners:

if you watch adults coming in in the initial stages, the heads are down they're very quiet...you see them changing over the period. One of the things that, that used to strike me sometimes...they were very comfortable by the end but a lot of the time they didn't want to move to the next stage because they had created an environment that they were accepted in and were acceptable in and they were comfortable in but they had to go to the next stage then and....a part of our job is to move them on (R2)

The idea of dissonance between a learner's habitus and the institutional habitus is important in the light of R2's comment. Feeling 'out of place' (Bourdieu's 'fish out of water') is something many adult learners experience when they return to education. If they learn to find their way and fit in the degree of dissonance reduces until, as is evident in R2's extract, they feel comfortable in an environment 'that they were accepted in' and don't want to move on to the next level. R12 acknowledged that our aspirations for adult learners might not always be realised, 'we've had that with some of those adults we've seen go through our hands here and no matter what glorious future you carve out for

them, you and I know that they are sometimes just as happy pottering along back in the old rut’.

R12’s comment shows that while tutors and managers might have aspirations for learners to undergo significant changes in their habituses, learners can and do choose to resist and reject the aspirational myth. R12 continued by suggesting that maybe we have failed some of the adult learners because our aspirations for adult learners were not met:

But I am conscious of the fact that...some of the people that we know that have gone through the thing, while they did quite well and so on...we didn’t succeed in altering their lives to any great extent. Now some people have made massive headway and...have gone into higher education and degrees and so on but we have also a number of people who almost reverted back to where they were

R12’s use of the words ‘almost reverted’ at the end of this quote is interesting when contrasted with ‘massive headway’. It is as if those who did not use the capitals gained to go on to higher education or employment are seen as not undergoing significant transformation, despite doing well during the course. But this view can negate individual agency, responsibility and resistance and a different viewpoint as to what constitutes a successful outcome. As Margolis et al (2001, p16) note, ‘students are not simply passive receptacles but active players in the systems that attempt to socialize them. Students negotiate, accommodate, reject, and often divert socialisation agendas’. If adult learners go ‘back to where they were’ why should this be constructed negatively by tutors and managers? Adult learners may return to where they were yet have

achieved many things that college staff may either not legitimate or simply be completely unaware of.

When asked what or whom he felt we were educating adult learners to be R3 (manager) indicated people's lives did not have to be radically transformed:

it doesn't have to be somebody who leaves and goes on and becomes CEO of a multi-national company but somebody might come in and experience a couple of years here, learn a certain amount of skills and even go back home and just be a better mother, daughter, son, whatever to their own small, family nucleus if they never go and contribute outside of that, that's no harm provided they have got something out of the time here and they are a better person in some way for it even within their own, eh small community

R3's 'small community' and R12's 'going back to where they were' are important in the light of the concept of habitus and whether, having gained the capitals of accreditation, learners feel a sense of disjunction 'going back' because their habitus has changed. However, for some learners going back to their family and community nexus with different knowledges, skills and perspectives is still reflective of change and personal transformation in the light of Mezirow's theory.

Building social capital

The social capital acquired through building social networks and relationships was seen as extremely important both by learners and tutors. R4 described the

support system in her class, 'we gave each other all our phone numbers and the minute anyone got stuck they could ring someone on the course...they didn't mind opening up to someone else on the course and saying 'listen I can't do this' and I'd say 'well, I couldn't either, you're alright'. R16 (tutor) explained the value of adult learners' support networks:

I suppose like any other group of learners, there's a huge amount of learning and support...nothing compares to going through a process, any learner will tell you that... and having all the hurdles...and having your buddies in your class and being able to compare notes about how you actually managed to get through that and that kind of...affirmation of each other is hugely important, again like...eh...support in the journey and the identification and the feeling that you're in the same boat..

The comments of R4 and R16 are important here in relation to Lave and Wenger's communities of practice and the learning that takes place through the social relationships within this community. Within these networks of support adult learners constructed their emerging identities of adult learner by learning from and supporting each other in both the academic and social practices they encountered and experienced as they negotiated their way through the course.

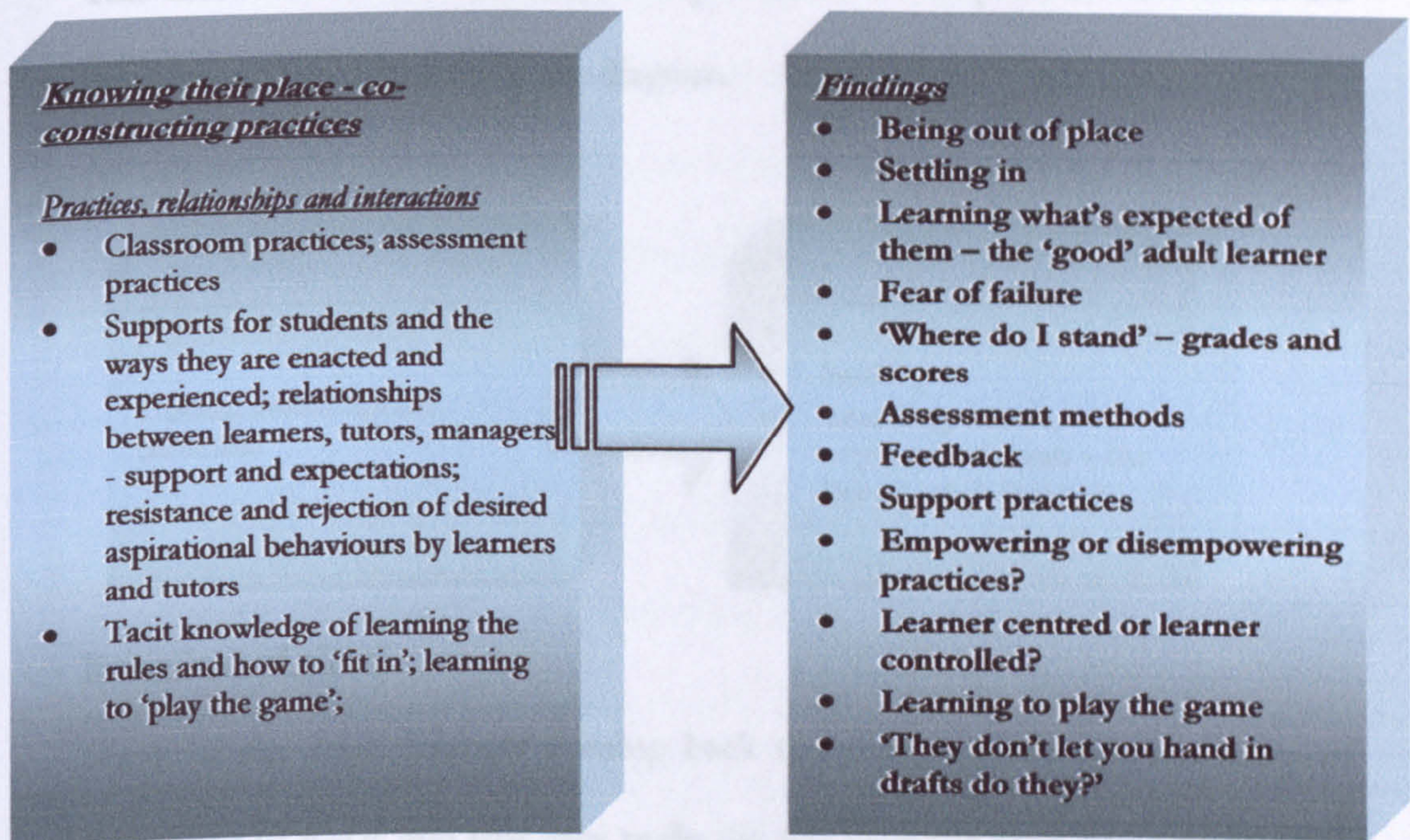
Although adult learners developed their own strong networks R3 (manager) was disappointed that there was limited participation in general college activities, 'one of the things that I... would've hoped for more from adults...would be more participation in, in extra curricular activities or out of classroom activities whether it is being involved in a fundraising or being involved in sport'. He felt

that developing social networks with adult groups in other colleges would help them 'become involved in other activities...where they would interact with other adults whether it is things like debates or quizzes...within the other adult courses (*within the network of colleges*)'. However he acknowledged that lack of childcare was one of the main barriers to greater participation in extra-curricular activities, 'if we could develop things like having childcare facilities for people, maybe for the afternoons or something like that that would be useful'.

Summary

Learners and tutors both recognised the importance of accreditation. The currency and constraints of the work placement were recognised in terms of its potential for accessing different capitals with some learners drawing on their own familiar capital of 'caring'. Many learners identified changes in their lives as a result of doing the course but there were some differences in the aspirations of learners and tutors. Both learners and tutors recognised the importance of the social capital gained through building relationships and networks.

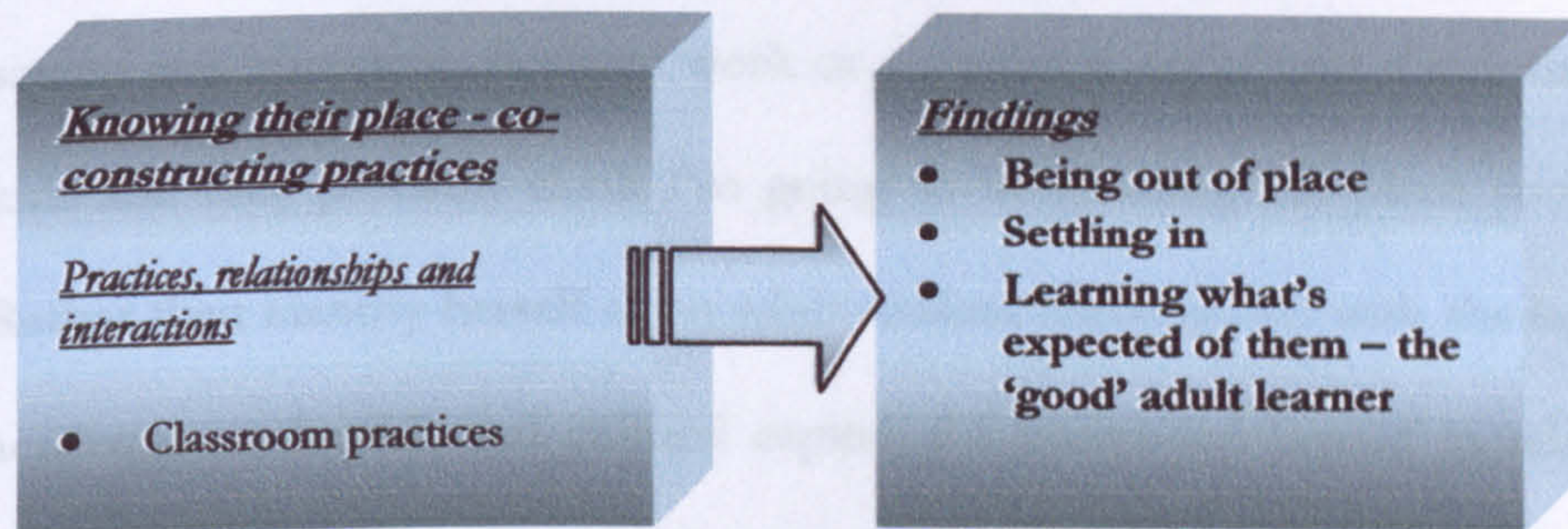
Through which practices in the educational institution are the desired aspirational behaviours co-constructed?



Asking how adult learners come to learn what's expected of them when returning to education draws on the explication of habitus as 'a sense of one's place but also a sense of the place of others' (Bourdieu, 1989, p19). One of the main ways through which adult learners come to 'know their place' is through messages mediated through the practices in the hidden curriculum or institutional habitus. Adult learners and tutors identified many different ways as to how learners came to 'know their place' and fit in. Learning how and what to study and the practices of academic writing, for example, involved learning what is deemed to be important knowledge. Learning the social practices of being a student and developing social networks of support were both important for fitting in.

In order to facilitate greater clarity of presentation of findings this final section is sub-divided into four parts each of which will present the findings relating to

a specific area of the co-constructing practices in the adult learner curriculum. This first section deals with classroom practices and will present these under the headings on the right side of the diagram.



Being 'out of place'

Many of the adult learners coming back to education expressed a sense of 'being out of place' and that they really did not have the right to be there. R17 clearly remembered feeling, 'I actually expected to be kicked out after a month, asked 'what the hell are you doing here, I thought, God, I'll be no good here, you'll be kicked out you know'. Likewise R24 (focus group) worried constantly about 'getting things wrong' so much so that, 'I was afraid I'd be thrown out, I was afraid I'd be told 'listen, it's not working out, you'll have to leave.' For R10 there was no culture of further or higher education in her family or local community, 'where I live as well, there's not many people that went to college so the children kind of haven't got kind of a lot of people to look up to'. The feeling of not fitting in or feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1989, 1992) could be reflective of both their significant early experiences of school and their habitus being at dissonance with the institutional habitus of the college.

When R4 was moving on to higher education this feeling of being 'out of place' arose again. Despite holding a full FETAC award with distinctions in practically all subjects, she described her feelings going to registration day, 'and I went down to register and there were hundreds of people there. The whole square was swarming, freshers' week or something, and I said, God, they're all kids and they probably think I'm going to be cleaning the place you know'. Rather than identify herself as an adult student entering HE with the legitimate academic credentials and cultural capital, R4 positioned herself in relation to age, 'they're all kids' and gender and class, 'they probably think I'm going to be cleaning the place'. Her response can be seen in the light of what Bourdieu (1986) cited in Skeggs (1997, p90) says about 'never having the certainty that they are doing it right which is one of the main signifiers of middle-class dispositions'.

Settling in

Some learners identified the support of their class group and tutors as key factors in helping them to fit in. Others used strategies of setting short-term time goals for themselves and telling themselves they could leave at any stage. R9 thought about leaving the course early on. She drew on support from tutors to help her, 'I did talk to tutors...and they encouraged me to stick with it and the whole point was to get something at the end of it and that was the reason I was doing it'. R4 set herself targets of two weeks at a time telling herself she could leave at any stage, 'I told myself that I would give it two weeks when I came here... and eh, the first week went by ...and I said I'll probably make it to the second week you know...when it got to the second week, ah well I'll stay for the month'.

Learning what's expected of them - the 'good' adult learner

Adult learners picked up on expectations of what it meant to be a 'good' student through interactions with tutors and classroom practices. Some learners' conceptualisations of the good adult learner reflected a throwback to school experiences. R13 thought that as adult learners they would be 'expected to sit in the class and listen to the tutors and ask questions and not to shout over'. R3 (manager) expected 'no more or no less' from adult learners than from any other student, 'general behaviour...attendance...try and achieve success to be another successful student coming out of here'. For R1 (tutor) the 'good' adult learner was the one who was interested in participation, 'there's always delight like in the ones who ask all the questions and read all the books that you recommend or they do the variety of tasks that you ask them to do'.

R8 explained how learners came to know the different expectations of tutors from the ways they managed classroom behaviour:

There are some tutors who won't put up with it and like there are some tutors that people just walk in the middle of their class and start talking...you know the tutors you just can't do it with...you know by their whole attitude, their whole body language, their whole personality, you know... but then in other classes there would be total chaos

R11 told a similar story, 'well, we totally just have your own conversations. We'd kind of suss out who like you know...and you'd probably sit there and have our conversations like they're not even there...I think a lot of adult learners come back and they haven't any sense of how to behave in class'.

The notion of the 'good' adult learner was not restricted to expectations about behaviour in class. Here R10 described how she felt pressure to perform to a very high level in a subject that she found quite difficult:

I did find that with one certain teacher, it was real like, 'well I want you to get a distinction' and that's it. And I was like...I'd be happy with a pass...I found it very hard...because I feel then if I didn't get the distinction there I'd be disappointing that teacher. But then that's what I thought at the start but I learned it's...it's me at the end of the day...now it would be great if I did get a distinction but it's very hard for somebody to tell you when you know nothing about something, 'well, I'm just letting you know that I want you to get a distinction'

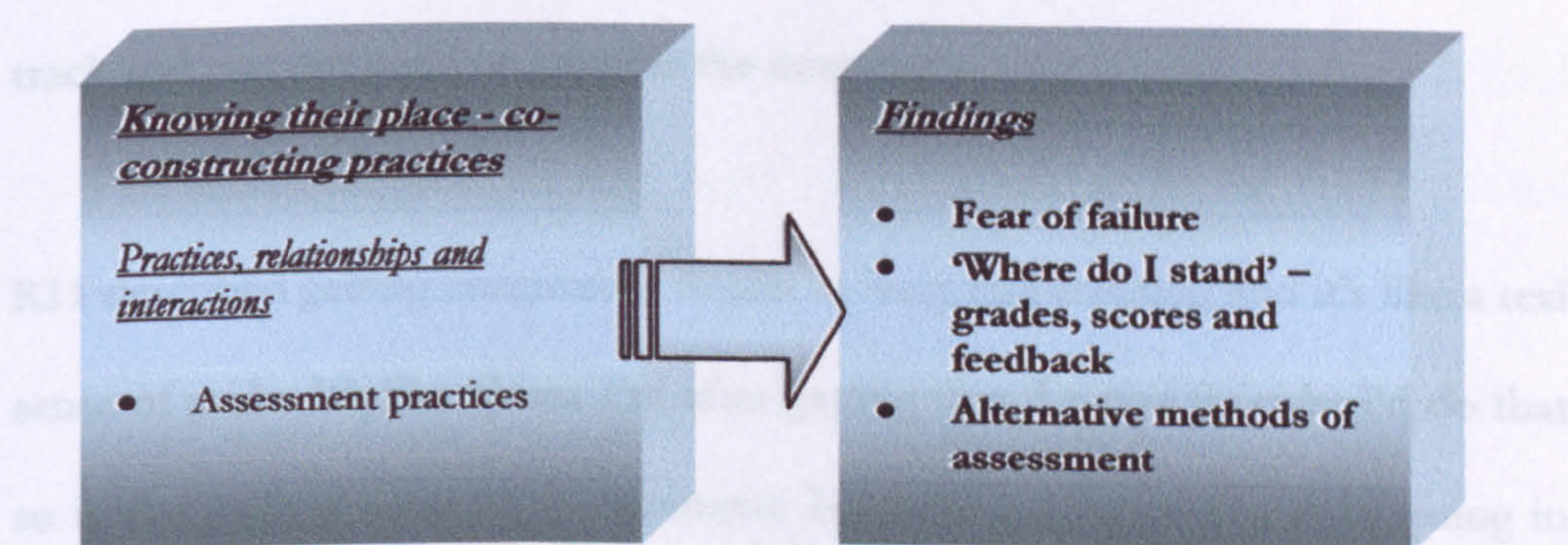
For R10 the pressure of high expectations from this particular tutor and the difficulty of the subject led her to get to the stage where she had to 'juggle' her time because otherwise, 'I had to just say to meself, right I'm going to fail the rest of them and just to get a distinction or a pass or a merit in _____. So I had to learn then to put them all in together and I done that'.

In a similar situation R9's way of coping was to give the subject up, 'I found there was too much for what you were going to get at the end of it. I said, 'what's the point'... like I did the first few things and I tried. And you know, I said fair play to the other girls for sticking it out but I just didn't think it was for me'. R10 and R9 rejected the desired aspirational behaviour transmitted in this subject in different ways, R10 by stepping back and managing it with the rest of her subjects and R9 coped by giving the subject up.

Summary

Many adult learners coming back to education experienced a feeling of being 'out of place' but found the support of the class group and tutors to be important. Learners came to know the different expectations of tutors through classroom practices and both responded to and coped with these expectations in different ways.

Assessment practices



Fear of failure

Both learners and tutors recognised the anxieties that formal assessment brought. For R11 failure was her first thought, 'at the start I thought oh my God we have an assignment and I'm going to fail, that's all that I could see'. For R4 'an assignment for someone who's been away from education is a huge ordeal, it's like suddenly landing on Mars and being told you have to find water'. R3 (manager) was very aware of how formal assessment affected learners, 'the big fear of failure again particularly for people who haven't gone through or have had to go through anything like that, for many of them never in their lives'.

'Where do I stand?' – grades and scores

Many learners in the study worried about the ways that marks would be given out. Some worried that lists of names and marks would be put up on the wall. R20 (focus group) thought that teachers might go around the room and call out the marks, 'just like they did in school, remember those spelling tests'? As the course progressed some learners began to feel a sense of achievement and that they were learning from the process. R13 felt that, 'once you get your marks in an assignment you kind of know how well you did, you're kind of on the right track and you can build on that for the next one'.

R11 described getting assignment results as 'very empowering and it's like a real sense of pride. It's like "Jesus I'm after getting that, I never thought I'd do that so it was really a sense of achievement. It probably gives you a little spring in your step to do another one. You get addicted!" She explained that she responded differently to feedback as the course progressed, 'when you're getting that feedback at the end, I think your actual self esteem has improved so you don't take it as personally as if you got them at the start...you know like you kind of learn that the tutors are there just for your best interest, encourage you to do better'.

R3 (manager) commented on the value of the overall achievement for adult learners:

you know the achievement people have...like what we had with these adults (*graduation ceremony*) there last week...many people will never get the opportunity to go up in front of a thousand people and accept an award or

a certificate whether it is from the Lord Mayor or anything else but that's a big achievement...for many adult returners that's a bigger achievement than the guy who gets a first-class honour at 21 years old who has six honours at Leaving Cert, who had support at home, who was well-educated and never had to rear a child or whatever, you know, the privileged person as it were, privileged in one sense. So there's achievement and there's scales of achievement

R3's comment is important here in the light of Bourdieu's thesis that those who come into the education system already in possession of the social and cultural capital gained through schooling and whose own habitus is more congruent than dissonant with that of the educational setting have an advantage being more like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1992, p127).

Alternative methods of assessment

Although all FETAC modules allow for a range of assessment methods and techniques (Appendix 8) there was a reliance on written assessment. R7 (tutor) felt that the variety of assessment methods across the course was a good preparation for adult learners, 'the fact that there are so many different types of assessments - reports, assignments, presentations, exams - I think that there's a good mixture, because these are the things that they will be asked to do in the world of work or in the world of higher education'. R7's use of 'world' here in relation to employment and higher education positions them as 'other' to the current world (habitus) of learners. Learning to do reports, exams and presentations are things they need to know in order to become part of those worlds.

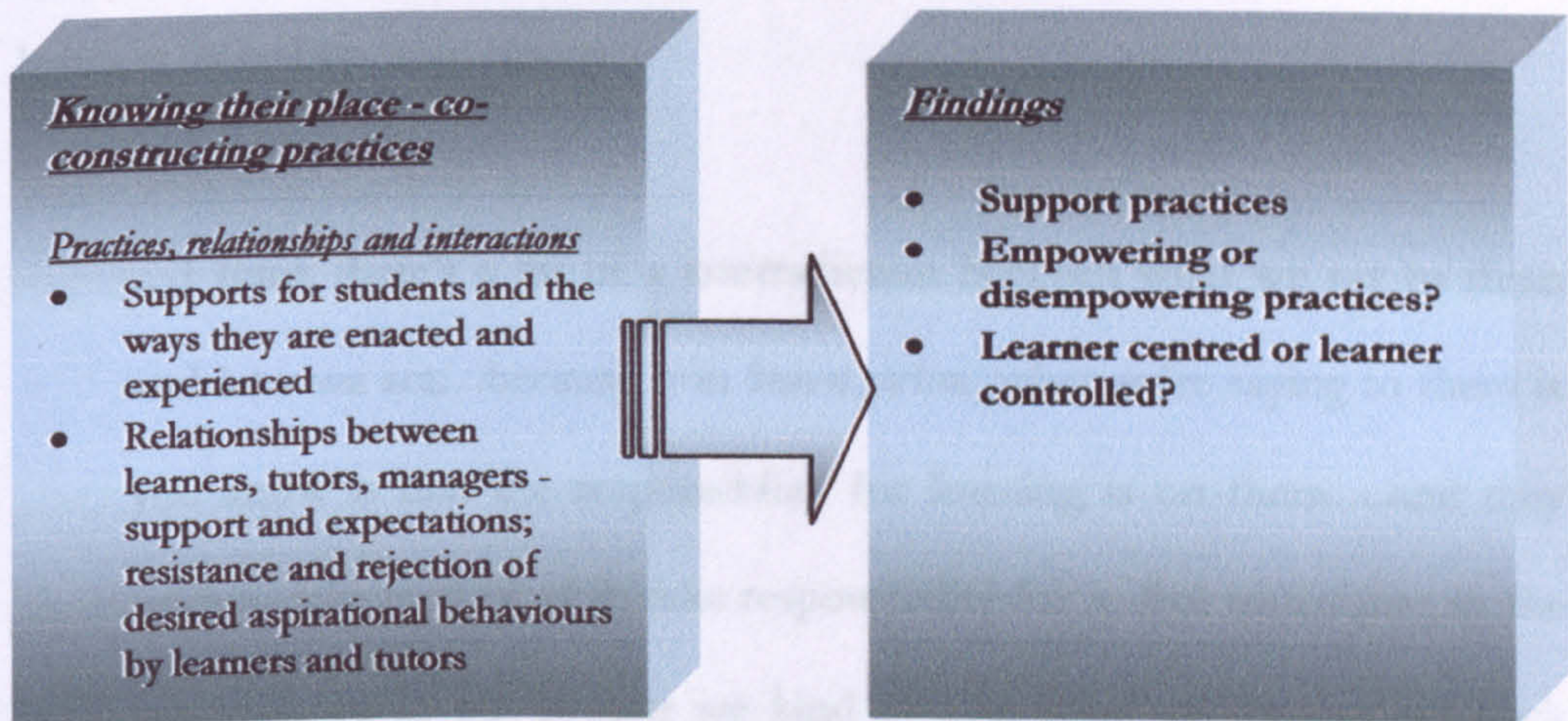
Many learners were not aware of alternative methods of assessment. R13 remembered 'it was mostly written, apart from the oral presentation in Communications and the presentation in Caring for the Child with Special Needs'. R12 (manager) acknowledged that there was scope for changing the parameters of assessment techniques:

we probably do need to be more versatile and imaginative...I've noticed a couple of teachers during the year were using a viva, oral examinations where students had missed an exam and they were recording an actual exam...I think I would like to see more of that being done

Summary

Both adult learners and tutors were aware of the demands of assessment and the anxieties learners held concerning formal assessment. Although learners worried about grades and scores they realised that marks and feedback on assignments were an integral part of the learning process and necessary in order to progress.

Support practices



Tutors emphasised the importance of supporting adult learners but were concerned about the difficulty of achieving the balance between being supportive yet at the same time facilitating independence and responsibility. R6 highlighted what she felt were some of the characteristics of the approach to adult learners, 'we would maybe be a little bit more lenient with regards to deadlines ...and I suppose...we'd be maybe more conscious of giving them support than we would to students coming in straight from school'. Likewise R16 felt that adult learners were seen as more in need and deserving of support:

certainly the ethos would be...that... adult learners returning by virtue of the fact that they've missed out on education and are unused to the process would get a lot more support, concessions would be made on...things like eh, deadlines... in mind that they're not used to this experience...so I suppose the ...among teachers would be that they definitely are in need of...deserve eh...more support.

However R6 felt that our approach led to ambiguity in the messages adult learners picked up from tutors:

...I think there's a bit of a contradiction between what we say to them and how we act...because, you know, what, what we're saying to them is you know is that the responsibility for learning is on them....and they have to take control of it, take responsibility for it. But sometimes in the way that we in our actions we kind of take some of the control back and...you know that may not be a good thing

Empowering or disempowering practices?

Tutors, managers and learners all highlighted different tensions around the ways in which concessions around the timetable, attendance, assignment deadlines, punctuality and support with assignment work were interpreted and enacted in practice. For example classes in the return to education course are held only in the mornings. The flexibility of this was important for learners because of their family responsibilities. For R11 the hours were important, 'when I started here, me daughter was in school from 9am to 1.40pm so it was just a blessing...and then you're off all the same time as the kids' holidays'. However R12 (manager) felt that the shorter hours acted not only as a constraint but actually did students a disservice:

you could ask yourself are we doing them any favours by making those concessions? So are we almost condemning them to kind of, eh....to be second class students and second class achievers by the fact that they have such a limited schedule. So that's one area that maybe...in a sense we sort

of sold the students short in that we didn't set high enough standards for them of showing them what was required to break out of the cycle of deprivation

R12 felt such a limited timetable meant we were 'just enabling them to a certain extent by kind of indulging them'. However he clearly acknowledged his distance from the course, 'on the other hand I probably amn't as familiar as you or some of the other tutors are of the actual chaotic personal lives they often have and the huge demands there are on them, the difficulties they experience so it's a bit easier for me to kind of just, to theorise, to disapprove'.

R16 (tutor) highlighted a tension between care and support and the variant messages learners may pick up from different tutors. In this extract she set up a dichotomy of high support/low expectations vs. low support/high expectations:

...there's a whole divergence of opinion then... from high support, low expectation to ehm...low support, high expectation...if teachers have an expectation that because someone is an adult learner from a certain background that they cannot or should not be expected to do x, y and z...that that's maybe more reflecting of the ethos...students then conform to that

She observed that there was a conflict between a perception of adult learners 'which tends to highlight the fact that the students are disadvantaged and a constant emphasis then on that...em...that allowances should be made for that'

and a view that recognises the importance of adult learners being 'able to move to the position where they can actually operate in a more mainstream setting'.

I do note that the few teachers that come from the same background as the students are in fact somewhat more demanding of the students in terms of them complying with the same rules and regulations as other students...and would have I suppose in a way higher expectations...would say that they have to comply with the rules and regulations which is kind of more....that they need to be moved more quickly...

The use of 'mainstream' is important here as it implies that the practices in the return to education course are 'other' than mainstream. Here mainstream equates with normal or conventional and being outside the mainstream positions adult learners as other in terms of their habitus. R6 (tutor) felt that if there was ambiguity in the way tutors acted towards adult learners in relation to assignment deadlines and attendance for example, that there could be an unintentional message being transmitted that 'you're different and we expect you to have certain difficulties or problems'. Learners having problems was not the issue, it was more so that R6 was concerned that 'the message I suppose could be...that there's an expectation that maybe you should have these problems...or maybe you should focus on them or pay attention to them'. She elaborated on this further:

...we do treat them differently, I know I do anyway. Even the way we talk about them is kind of different, isn't it? And we're probably more

worried about them succeeding... or em ..we take more of an interest probably in whatever problems they happen to have...but maybe I think we're more sensitive to....the problems they may have and there's a difference between being sensitive to the fact that they're coming back or the fact that they might have left school early and actually passing that on to them and treating them differently I mean like...I'm kind of undecided about it because I don't know whether it helps in the long run or not.

This is also supported by R3 (manager) who viewed adult learners as 'a certain community' whom we treat 'in a way that would be above and beyond the normal student' and that in view of this that we needed to 'work better, harder, for them to achieve...there are things that they need that the ordinary student may not'.

These extracts have significance in relation to the institutional habitus of the course indicating that through curricular and support practices the institutional habitus transmits messages and expectations to adult learners that position them as 'other' and outside of mainstream because of their own habituses. It also suggests that the culture or institutional habitus of 'mainstream' does not allow for this difference or 'otherness' and that there is an acknowledgement of adult learners' 'difference' within the institutional habitus of the return to education course.

Most of the learners interviewed recognised the importance and benefit of having supports for adult learners. R10 commented, 'I think you give us a great opportunity and you understand ...that we're out of school like an awful long

time...To me, though sometimes I'd look at you more like...you're teachers but like counsellors as well'. Sometimes there was difficulty concerning the difference between what constituted support and what could be construed as doing the work for students. Here R9 talked about the study support class:

When we had _____the first year he was helping, he was just helping the girls. And I said I'm not going to bother going to his class...cos I thought he was just helping with the reading or something. And I came into class one day and everybody had their assignment done...And I said how did you all....and they said, oh _____ helped us to do it....I got very upset. I did that assignment myself...the girls were saying that what _____did with them was you know the different needs (Maslow) that you have. So I just looked at the needs myself...from there I just did...so I didn't get any help so I felt delighted I did it myself. And I gave it up and then I just said but sure you do the work yourself anyway. That's what you do anyway, but I was just disgusted that they were after doing it all in his class and I hadn't, I didn't...and I would have been there if I'd known

R9 had mixed feelings between being proud of her own achievements, 'I did that all myself' and the fact that she felt she missed out on valuable support, 'I would have been there if I'd known'.

Learners who had moved on to higher level courses highlighted key differences in their experiences as adult learners in both courses. R11 acknowledged the

additional support she received in the return to education course but suggested that it could be taken advantage of:

the message is yeah you get on the (Return to Education) course and it's like then you're kind of mothered... a lot more was done for you. Like you know you could manipulate...I know it's empowering on one hand but if it was a little more stricter...

In this next extract she showed how treating adults leniently can be perceived by them as having lower expectations of them because of who they are:

I just, I felt like a lot of the time that they really didn't expect anything. Some of them didn't expect anything off us. There were other teachers that you would probably respect more than other teachers. Because you would test the boundaries...but basically the ones that you respected more, you would work harder for than the ones that kind of didn't really expect much off you. That is maybe like "they're only back and we'll be easy on them"...but unfortunately it's not like that everywhere like in the real world. It's good 'cos its only three hours...but you should be made work for it

In her response R11 constructed two different worlds. In the world of the return to education course too much leniency in the name of support resulted in perceived or perhaps indeed genuinely lowered expectations of learners, 'if you hadn't an assignment done, it's like, 'well I haven't got it done, it will be

grand, I'll have it done next week'. But in the 'real world' of higher level education things were very different:

if you do that now it's sent in as a late so you're only entitled to a pass. And now if I'm in class I could be in three classes in a row. You can't go out for a cup of tea. You just have to be in the class. It was a wake up call...I just couldn't believe it when I started on this course...

'Learner-centred or learner-controlled?'

Learners, tutors and managers recognised that getting the balance between fostering a learning environment reflecting the espoused adult education ethos while still maintaining standards around attendance, punctuality and classroom behaviour proved problematic at times. R8 highlighted the need for that balance:

it just needs to be a little more strict. I don't know how you'll do that... because people have problems, their children get sick and all of that but like people do abuse the system and all, you know. So there has to be some kind of balance...just because I know they're adults and responsible for themselves but we manipulate when we can

R16 (tutor) commented that this is complicated by different tutors giving different messages to learners about:

how much input they're expected to give, how much leeway they have in terms of deadlines etc, how much leeway they have in terms of

attendance, what's perceived as acceptable excuse for absence...how much support with the work, how much has to be their independent work

Classroom practices were not immune to the tension between trying to use adult education methodologies of group work discussion and experiential learning and yet establish boundaries, respect for others and get the work done. Learners found that tutors operated in different ways. As R11 described it:

There was all the shouting and roaring, it was just crazy...I think that probably _____ was the only one that could keep bringing it back to what he was trying to talk about...and the history teacher, he was very good as well because someone actually cursed in the class one day and he just cut them and just "excuse me" So I thought like so you learned to kind of respect him and not do it again

A possible explanation for the situation described by R11 could be that tutors tried to treat adult learners as adults and not enforce the type of strict classroom control reflective of school. R16 (tutor) felt that, 'most tutors definitely perceive the relationship as equal, as adult to adult' but R6 highlighted a particular dilemma for her when asked about how adult learners find out tutors' expectations in class, 'I tend to feel that like if there's a group of people who are all my age or older it's much more difficult to ask them to be quiet, to listen, to sit down'.

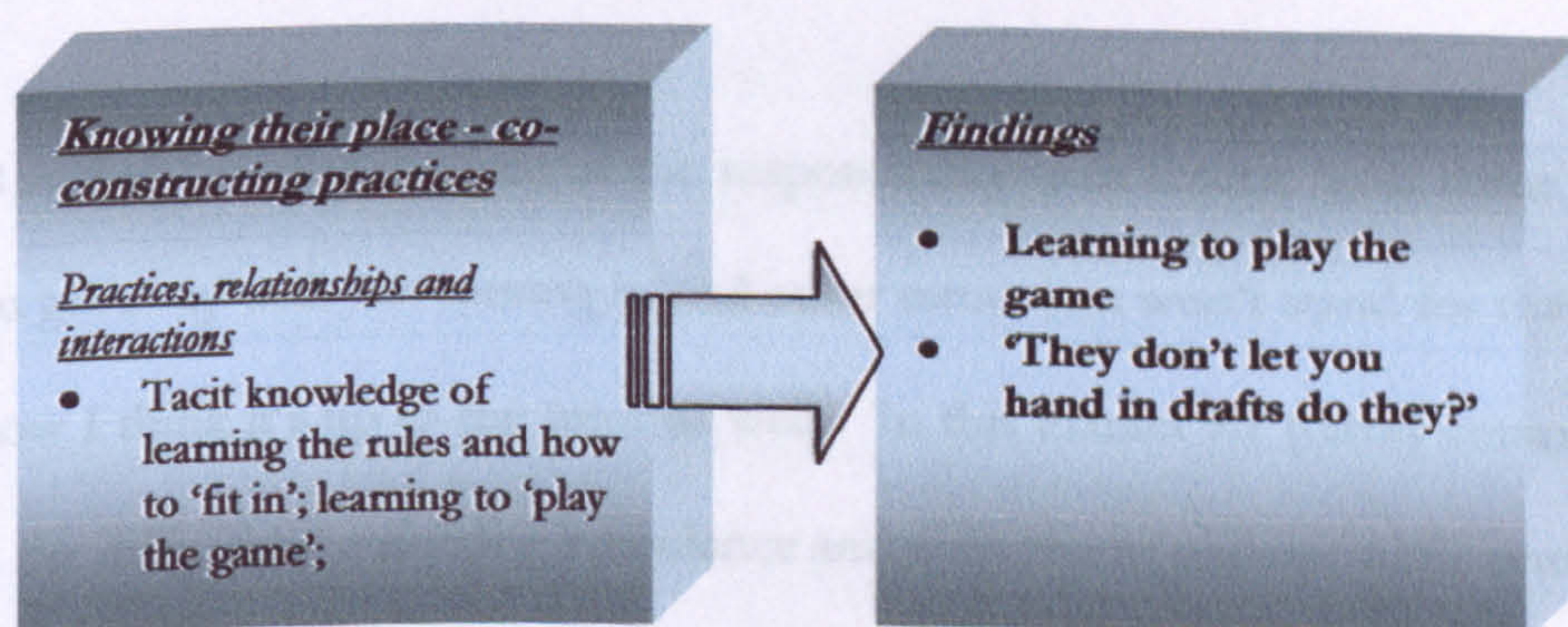
R8 acknowledged the difficulties for tutors trying to keep control of the discussion particularly when in some classes, 'people just had no interest,

yapping and coming and going'. However R15 found that as the year went on learners began to take control of their own behaviour and that of others, 'I can see the difference really. I wouldn't say that the class is disruptive any more, because the students are saying to them themselves, 'we need to learn this', that's the best way, never mind from a teacher, if they're even telling me then I better listen'.

Summary

The interview data highlighted a key tension for tutors around the different expectations of adult learners and the implications for the support practices offered. Adult learners were seen as in need of support but both tutors and learners acknowledged that sometimes lenient practices regarding attendance, classroom behaviour and deadlines were disempowering rather than empowering.

Learning the rules and 'learning to play the game'



Learning the rules and 'playing the game' involved learning what was necessary to become a 'successful' adult learner academically and socially and acceptance of certain desired aspirational behaviours and rejection of others. Some of the adult learners interviewed felt it was easy to get around assignment deadlines. R11 described how she felt it was easy to 'manipulate' when it came to meeting

assignment deadlines, 'well like, I think when I did the first two years with other adult learners a lot more was done for you. You could easily get away with not having an assignment done, you know, you could kind of manipulate really'. R16 (tutor) observed that even though the practice of accepting late work wasn't necessarily confined to the return to education course, 'you see it with all teachers and more so with Return to Learning teachers, you see them going around as May approaches tearing their hair out trying to get the...the goods'.

R14 thought the flexibility was important, 'it's very good the way they make allowances if you're not in or if you're late with an assignment if they know you're genuine. However R11 felt that the course was too accommodating:

you could just come and go as you please. You can go out to the canteen and have sandwiches, you could go and have your smoke, you didn't have to come into class. You could get someone to sign you in. You could go missing for a week. You'd be like "oh I was sick and I didn't get a letter"

R8 agreed but placed some of the responsibility with tutors, 'with some tutors you get away with not turning in and other tutors just won't stand for that. You know I think it's up to the tutor as well'. In this extract R1 (tutor) commented on the difficulties enforcing attendance and assignment policies while remaining mindful of adult learners' needs:

they dictate an attitude to us I think in the most part...whenever you tackle any of them about their attendance it's always 'I have children' and eh.....to a certain extent they're allowed away with it. There isn't a

mechanism there for I suppose penalising them for not coming in and em...they will nearly always coerce or negotiate with a teacher to allow them to submit the stuff on time (*i.e. any time up to the FETAC external assessment period*) which I suppose is good or fair but not to the ones who are just abusing the system you know...

These examples show that while tutors set deadlines for assignment submission both tutors and learners are complicit in rejecting the desired behaviours of meeting deadlines and acceptable attendance. Learners did so by not having the work done and tutors were complicit by not enforcing more strict deadlines, attendance policies and classroom behaviour. However R1's comment raises several issues. Firstly for some adult learners family responsibilities can greatly influence their ability to attend regularly and meet set deadlines and secondly there are some learners who constantly take advantage but manage to submit the work in the end raising questions as to the fairness of this for other learners.

'They don't let you hand in drafts when you're going on, sure they don't?'

Other aspects of learning the rules and playing the game were the ways in which adult learners learned the academic and social practices in order to 'fit in' as an adult learner in the return to education course. These practices involved learning how and what to study, learning academic writing and acquiring the academic literacies necessary for assignment work and examinations. Many adult learners worried about knowing what was expected in assignments but also about whether they would be able to write in an 'academic' way. R17 described writing an assignment for the first time:

I went home and done pages of homework...I wrote out loads of things and brought them in...she took them away, brought them back the next week and 'that's all wrong, you don't need that at all'...I'd pages and pages of the stuff which with all the talk we didn't need.

All learners interviewed stressed the importance of attending the study skills classes where any subject content, assignment work and support with structure, layout and writing was always covered. R4 described how her class group came to realise the importance of attending the study support class for help with content and structure of assignments:

I don't think we would have got through without that because sometimes, some tutors are, they mean well but they don't express themselves as well on a particular issue. And we'd often find that when we leave the room we'd be looking at each other and saying 'but how do you do it?' We'd wait for the next study skills class and he'd be leapt on when we walked in the door and we'd be all panicking....he was brilliant...by the time he left sure we could have wrote War and Peace no problem at all, do you know?

Some groups availed of the study support classes much more so than others as R7 (tutor) observed:

...sometimes they might ask if they use the class to go off and work in the library and, or they wanted to work on assignments. And I would maybe just help somebody one to one...After Christmas I had a more involved role with them and actually covering specific topics, answering specific questions, looking at assignment briefs

R7's comment ties in with the findings in Chapter 4 where analysis of attendance patterns in this class indicates that adult students learn to use the class time and the tutor strategically particularly as they become more inducted into assessment and writing practices and more familiar with the academic literacies required of them. As the course progressed learners became more familiar with what was expected in assignments and more confident in their own abilities. They had also become more confident members of their community of practice in relation to academic work and writing. As R14 observed 'we all shared ideas and tips with each other about assignments, things like layout and structure and stuff like referencing. Different people had different strengths you know and we learned from that'. R13 explained why she stopped showing drafts of her assignment work during her second year on the course:

I'm not leaving myself in to proof read anymore because if I have to go on I can't be doing this...but that only came in the last few months...in the first year you could do it and it was done although it probably wasn't meant to be done you know as much...but I think it's important as adults coming back to kind of know is it right or is it not right...but I mean as time goes on when you go into the other subjects you kind of learn well I'm ok there, I should be ok there

As R9 observed, 'being able to get someone to look over the work was great. But they don't let you hand in drafts when you're going on, sure they don't?'

Summary

Learning to 'play the game' involved learning the academic and social practices necessary to take on the adult learner identity. Learners came to know how to play the game with different tutors depending on their expectations by accepting some of the desired aspirational behaviours and rejecting others.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I presented the findings from the individual and focus group interviews. There are several key findings from the interview data. Firstly the adult learner identity is conceptualised as someone who is lacking in basic educational qualifications and in need of support. Both learners and tutors gave more privilege and recognition to FETAC accredited and theoretical subject knowledge in the curriculum over the non-accredited subjects and learners' experiential knowledge is given limited privilege. Accessing cultural, symbolic and social capitals are facilitated through the processes of assessment, accreditation and through social networks and relationships built in the college and through work experience. A key tension to emerge was that between expectations and supports for adult learners and that some support practices in the adult learner curriculum were seen as disempowering rather than empowering.

Chapter 6 – The aspirational myths

I don't want to be asking 'have you got a club card' all my life

(R14)

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the main findings in the study and the extent to which they illuminate and provide answers to the research questions. In doing so I relate back to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and I discuss the implications for the literature critiqued in that chapter. In the summary of each section I draw out the implications for practice which will then be afforded greater detail in the following chapter. First of all I revisit the central aim of the thesis and the research questions.

The aim of this thesis was to examine the ways in which adult learners come to know their place and fit in and learn who or how to be when they return to formal education. In doing so I wanted to explore the specific practices, via the adult learner curriculum, through which the notion or conceptualisation of what it means to be an adult learner is co-constructed and transmitted and to look at the values, beliefs and assumptions that underpin these concepts and messages. Through this exploration it was hoped to achieve a much clearer picture of the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations implicit in the adult learner curriculum and in the educational processes and practices in the college and in doing so afford both staff and students more transparency and clarity about the choices available and the consequences of those choices for our learning and teaching. I argued that adults returning to education need to gain the legitimated knowledges and learn the practices of 'fitting in' in order to gain

more privileged forms of capital which are assumed to lead to better employment prospects and which open up more educational chances on the ladder of accreditation or qualifications.

Summary of key findings in the study

This study found that there were two facets to the notion of the aspirational myth of the adult learner. The first dimension conceptualised the type of adult learner whom we expected to come on the return to education course and whom we wanted to help. This notion constructed the adult learner as lacking in basic educational qualifications, juggling multiple roles and both in need of and deserving of support. We expected them to have problems because of who they were. A second dimension was built around our expectations of and aspirations for them both during the course and for the future. Both of these conceptualisations impacted on practices in the adult learner curriculum.

The findings showed that in the curriculum theoretical knowledge was largely privileged over technical knowledge and skills. This was reflected both in the choice of subjects for the curriculum and the ways in which knowledge was recontextualised through tutors' practices. The currency of the accredited subjects was given significance by learners and tutors however both were complicit in de-privileging the non-assessed components of the curriculum. Adult learners' experiential knowledge was deemed legitimate in class to exemplify aspects of theory but had limited validation in the academic practices of assessment. In the study the main ways through which adult learners were facilitated access to more privileged forms of capital were through gaining

‘college knowledge’ and learning to fit in, through assessment and through ‘becoming legitimate’ via accreditation.

Both learners and tutors felt that adult students received mixed messages as to what it meant to be an ‘adult learner’ on the course and that there were different expectations of them transmitted through classroom and support practices. A key tension to emerge in the study was that between tutors’ commitment to full support for adult learners and their concern that some of their practices may very well be undermining adult learners rather than fostering independence and autonomy.

Theoretical framework

The thesis draws on St Clair’s concept of the aspirational myth of the adult learner and Bourdieu’s analytical tools of field, capital and habitus as the conceptual framework. The aspirational myth of the adult learner is the idealised identity co-constructed by tutors and learners representing the ‘end point’ of learning and the attributes or traits they hope to acquire through the educational process (St Clair, 2004, p81, 82). Drawing on the work of St Clair the study set out to examine the extent to which the conceptualisation of the aspirational myth of the adult learner illuminates the construction of adult learners’ identity, subject positioning and sense of place when they return to education. The idea of an aspirational myth of the adult learner brings with it desired aspirational behaviours - if there is an idealised adult learner identity then what are the desired aspirational behaviours and practices that shape this myth and through which practices in the educational setting are these behaviours co-constructed?

Bourdieu's 'theoretical triad' (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008, p4) of field, capital and habitus offered the second layer of the conceptual framework for the study. Bourdieu's analytical tools afforded a theoretical lens through which to view the processes and practices and the interaction of agents within the return to education programme. Within the field of the return to education programme agents (adult learners) seek to access different and more privileged forms of capital the distribution of which is mediated by those in the field (tutors and managers) in possession of greater degrees of legitimated capitals. As Bourdieu notes 'fields are arenas of struggle for legitimation'. The positions occupied by agents in a field are shaped by both the capitals and habituses that they bring with them to a particular field and as Swartz (2008, p48) observes 'practices flow from the intersection of habitus with capital and field positions'.

In the remainder of this chapter I discuss the findings of the study in relation to each of the research questions and consider them in the light of the extant literature.

In what ways does the notion of an aspirational myth of 'adult learner' illuminate the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme?

The findings showed two interrelated dimensions to the conceptualisation of the aspirational myth of the adult learner. These constructions have implications for the enacted, delivered and experienced curriculum in the light of St Clair's (2004, p84) observation that the aspirational myth can be seen as 'a fundamental attribute of a learning setting, influencing the actions and beliefs of learners and instructors...like a crystallisation of their values'.

The first construction was build around the notion of the type of adult learner whom we expected to come on the return to education course with this construction evident in both the documentary and interview data. The second conceptualisation is that of whom or what we expected the adult learner to be or to become both during and as a result of the course. The learner is constructed as someone whom we feel we can and we want to help. As R7 (tutor) observed 'we want to help them and I think they want in, nobody wants to be tagged as disadvantaged...it's second chance, you know and an awful lot of them seize it with both hands'.

The findings provided evidence of what I conceptualise as a 'pre-entry' aspirational identity of the adult learner, an almost idealised notion of the type of learner that we want and *expect* to attract on the course. The construction of the adult learner as someone lacking in basic educational qualifications, as a 'second-chance' learner, most likely female, juggling multiple roles and both in 'need of' and 'deserving of' additional supports is evident in both the documentary and interview data.

This notion of the adult learner as 'deficient' is not new to the empirical literature (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2002; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) and the data supports the findings of previous empirical studies of adult learners not having a 'proper' educational background. Tutors worried about how the different expectations of adult learners across the course team impacted on support practices. There was a fine line between negotiating the balance between the level and nature of supports and trying to facilitate independent learning. Tutors recognised that they treated adult learners differently because

they felt they needed to be treated differently. They were keen to provide full support for adult learners but questioned the extent to which some of their practices were actually supportive in the long run.

The data showed that many women returning to education juggled multiple roles/identities in their lives of which their identity of 'student' was only one (Lewis, 1988 cited in Kember, 1999; Blaxter and Tight, 1994; and Clarke, 2003). In the return to education course adult learners' multiple roles are acknowledged by timetabling classes only in the mornings. Studies by both Britton and Baxter (1999) and Read et al (2003) both suggest that adult women students can be positioned as 'a problem' because of the need for timetable flexibility or provision of childcare facilities. However Hanson (1996) posits that running a flexible timetable in order to assist with childcare alienates those learners who 'wanted a full working day as a student'. Neither of these views was supported by the data from learners, tutors and managers in this study. I argue that the flexibility in timetabling attracts adult learners who would otherwise be unable to do the course because of their family responsibilities. Although these studies refer to higher education rather than further education they still have significance because women students will have the same family responsibilities and therefore the issues are similar.

For many learners the fear of coming back to education resulted from negative early school experiences and led to feelings of disjuncture. Their own habitus and their prior experiences were at dissonance with the institutional habitus causing them to feel out of place (the opposite of Bourdieu's 'fish in water') because their habitus did not 'fit' with what's expected of them in educational

setting. The findings in this study are in keeping with the findings of McFadden (1995) and Belzar (2004) who contend that prior experiences of school help construct student identities that can be difficult for them to leave behind.

For Bourdieu practices come about with the intersection of habitus and capital in a specific field. This raises the question of the extent to which adult learners have been socialised into the institutional habitus through gains in social and cultural capital and a change in their habitus accommodating this socialisation or whether the institutional habitus has changed to accommodate the diversity of the habitus and capitals of non-traditional students. As Zepke et al (2005, p5) note 'all students bring cultural capital to their learning. Where this is valued, they are more likely to succeed'. This question will be revisited later in this chapter when I discuss the practices through which the desired aspirational behaviours are co-constructed.

The second dimension of the aspirational myth was built around conceptualisations of 'whom' or 'what' we were educating adult learners to be and to become. Interview data from learners and tutors showed different conceptualisations of the 'good' adult learner ranging from good attendance and behaviour in class, doing assignment work, interested and motivated to being open minded, curious and having a desire to succeed. Another desired aspirational identity of the adult learner was someone who was moving on and up but not 'reverting back'. Learners who appeared to reject the aspirational myth by not doing anything with their qualification were viewed differently to those perceived to have made 'massive headway' i.e. gone on to higher education or taking the route towards better employment. The aspirational

myth that is valorised here is one of working hard to break out of their former social and economic milieu and using their change in habitus and acquired capitals to make something better of their lives and becoming 'another successful student' (Sandlin and St Clair, 2003; Sandlin and Cervero, 2003; Sandlin, 2004). However this tends to ignore the types of transformative learning that adult learners gained and may have taken back to their family and community nexus despite not going on to higher education or employment.

The return to education course is positioned as a second chance opportunity towards remedying deficit and towards gaining greater forms of capital for employment and for higher education. McFadden (1995) argues that access courses have always targeted 'those who have counted themselves as among the educationally disaffected' and Chapter 4 showed how the course development was underpinned by the idea of remedying deficit in order to break the cycle of disadvantage associated with low educational qualifications reflecting the remit of the local area partnership in tackling high levels of early school leaving, low levels of educational achievement and long term unemployment. The aims and objectives of the course against the backdrop of the partnership remit echoed the growing emphasis of adult education policy in Ireland on skills acquisition and individual responsibility in gaining qualifications and credentials (Fleming 2004; O'Brien and Fathaigh, 2007; Grummell, 2007). Both adult learners and tutors saw the course as a way of changing learners' lives and accruing capital that would take them out of their low paid, low status jobs. This supports Warmington's (2003) view of current day post-compulsory education and training as embedded in the rhetoric of 'accreditation-as-cultural capital' and as an exit route out of 'dependency and low expectation'.

Summary

The findings showed different conceptualisations of the aspirational myth of the adult learner identity in the adult learner curriculum. Tutors expected adult returners to have more problems than traditional students because of their habitus, prior educational experiences and lack of educational qualifications. The second dimension of the aspirational myth was constructed around tutors' aspirations for adult learners yet learners' and tutors aspirations differed. Tensions were evident between variant and sometimes conflicting expectations of adult learners which highlighted a particular challenge for practice, that of examining the extent to which our expectations of adult learners influence the type of supports given. This question will be revisited in the final chapter of this thesis.

What types of knowledges are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult learner curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these 'right' kinds of knowledge?

The study showed that in the adult learner curriculum theoretical knowledge was largely given legitimacy over technical knowledge and skills development. Learners' experiential knowledge was used in class to help learners gain access to existing (theoretical) knowledge but had limited validation in academic writing and assessment practices. Both learners and tutors gave privilege to FETAC accredited subjects over non-accredited subjects. This research question raises two key issues for discussion; firstly, why particular types of knowledge are legitimated in the adult learner curriculum while others are not, what knowledges are legitimated and who regulates this legitimation and secondly, if adult learners coming back to education need to acquire different

knowledges to those they bring with them then in what ways are their existing ways of knowing recognised, valued or indeed subjugated?

What knowledges are legitimated?

The discourses underpinning further and vocational education in Ireland privilege the acquisition of technical knowledge and skills for employment in a changing labour market. Chapter 4 showed how FETAC curriculum documentation privileged these skills and knowledges with an emphasis on the development of core transferable skills. The interview data highlighted a tension for tutors around whether they felt the course should incorporate more theoretical knowledge (that privileged in higher education) and how this might be done in a vocationally accredited course. Some tutors did not feel the current curriculum was appropriate but recognised that change would be difficult. FETAC accreditation demands employment links and opportunities and as R12 commented ‘accredited learning is the currency of the labour market and therefore we are not really masters of our own destiny’.

Whereas FETAC curriculum descriptors prescribe the content to be taught the legitimisation of knowledge in the adult learner curriculum is regulated by course tutors. Wheelahan (2008, p3) draws attention to ‘the gap between formal curriculum documents and teaching practice’ and suggests that the framework for ‘recontextualising knowledge in curriculum’ is teachers’ own teaching practice. Course tutors are afforded the control to legitimate certain knowledges over others but also to offer choice to learners where this exists in certain FETAC modules.

This can be seen at work in the adult learner curriculum. Most of the tutors interviewed questioned the appropriateness of some of the FETAC modules included in the curriculum. However despite outlining the constraints tutors adapted modules and their teaching to provide what they felt was necessary for adult students to learn. As R7 commented 'you have to work with what you have to work with'. A comparison of the documentary evidence for the Human Growth and Development module showed the ways that different knowledges (e.g. technical, skills and theoretical knowledge) were privileged across a range of curriculum documents. The interview data also showed how the subject tutor recontextualised curriculum knowledge according to the principles he thought to be important (Wheelehan, 2008, p3) giving more relevance to theoretical knowledge thus legitimating the types of capital necessary for and recognised in higher education. This theoretical knowledge was also given importance by the learners who progressed to higher level courses. Likewise the inclusion in the curriculum of more theoretical subjects such as Legal Studies and Social Studies over skills-based subjects such as Care Skills or Care Support indicated the privileging of theoretical knowledge.

There was also some scope for involvement of learners in the decision as to what knowledges are legitimated. The adult learner curriculum is largely comprised of specific modules where the requisite content is clearly outlined in the form of the specific learning outcomes. However some modules have optional units allowing tutors to negotiate with learners the units they wish to study. For example, in Legal Studies there is one compulsory unit and then learners must study four other units from a choice of thirteen. At the beginning of the year the course tutor and students spend some time discussing

the relative benefits of different units for their own interest and aspirations before making their final decision. By viewing the curriculum as a dynamic process the curriculum content is recontextualised and used for meaning-making and interpretation (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006, p280).

Why non-accredited subjects?

Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4 showed the different influences and interests represented in the design and development of the adult learner curriculum and how these interests were reflected in decisions relating to subject choice. The inclusion of the general education subjects was based on the premise that adult learners coming back to education were 'in need' of this type of education as a result of missing out the first time around. Reay (2002) argues that the notion of 'missing out' advances a deficit view of adult learners positioning them as 'unfinished' or somewhat incomplete. As no other course in the college offers such subjects this could be seen as further contributing to the construction of adult learners as 'other'. However the findings did not provide evidence for this and pointed more towards a questioning of the purpose of these subjects in the curriculum.

Tutors and learners had different views as to the exact purpose of the non-accredited subjects. Most learners interviewed regarded them as 'fillers' and questioned their relevance to the FETAC qualification. Likewise tutors queried not so much their purpose in the curriculum but more the lack of accreditation. However as Read et al (2003, p262) note 'individuals do not passively 'receive' discourses of academic culture: they actively engage with them and sometimes challenge them'. The poor attendance at the non-assessed subject reflected this.

The interview data showed that learners did not see these subjects as valuable because they are not accredited. An example of this was the inclusion of maths in the curriculum and the questions that arose in relation to why it did not work in the curriculum. These questions centre around the idea of whose interests were being served by the kind of maths offered in the curriculum, the purpose and function of the maths class, where it fitted in relation to the vocational and academic expectations of the course team and the learners and the ensuing lack of clarity around all of this. The implicit assumptions of the course team of including maths as 'useful knowledge' was in direct conflict with learners' perceptions and expectations of maths. Students wanted to see clearly how the maths class met their academic requirements and fitted in with the vocational area of social care and this was made neither clear nor explicit in the course information or in the subsequent classes. Learners quickly realised it was non-accredited and they could not see its relevance in terms of providing 'useful knowledge' or relevant capital towards their qualification. They rejected the aspirational behaviour of the 'rounded student experience' by choosing to focus on accredited subjects.

For some learners and tutors, poor attendance at non-accredited subjects gave rise to a feeling of resentment against what was construed as lack of interest and 'not taking the course seriously' and being an 'à la carte' learner. Viewed through the lens of the aspirational myth the aspirational identity of an adult returner who is 'committed, attends regularly and performs all the required assessment' could be constructed as one model on which performance is judged. This is in keeping with the discursive framework of Access programmes offered by Avis (1997) where students are positioned as 'hard-

working, motivated and committed'. However choosing not to take certain modules or subjects reflects adult learners' agency and autonomy. Therefore another aspirational identity could be that of the focused strategic learner who cuts out extraneous subjects considered to be standing in the way of gaining the qualification. Another interpretation could be that because adult learners are juggling multiple roles/identities it could be possible that when adult learners are in the classroom setting, our expectations of them centre around their identity as 'student' irrespective of all their other identities. Thus there are different interpretations of the potential identities that can be put forward as 'desirable' and to be aspired to as an adult learner in the FE adult returner curriculum. This highlights a key challenge for tutors and practices within the course as to how to accommodate and legitimate very different aspirational identities of adult returners and not privilege just one. This question will be picked up in the final chapter.

Summary

Both learners and tutors attached more importance to the accredited FETAC subjects giving them significance in the light of their currency as more privileged forms of capital. A tension exists as to whether as educators we want the adult learner curriculum to be vocational or academic. On the one hand the aspirational myth of the 'rounded student' who takes up all the subjects was lauded against the myth of the 'à la carte learner' who is selective in his/her attendance. Yet both learners and tutors were complicit in rejecting the desired aspirational behaviour of the 'rounded student' with learners not attending the non-compulsory subjects and tutors ignoring this and not enforcing attendance rules. However by choosing not to attend learners exercise their autonomy as

adult learners. There are questions as to why these subjects continue to be included in the adult learner curriculum. The implication for the curriculum is to provide a more flexible curriculum where core mandatory modules are offered with a choice of additional accredited subjects from which learners can choose. This would give legitimation to both the aspirational identities discussed earlier. However it poses challenges in terms of timetabling, staffing and structures within a further education college. Another option is to focus the curriculum solely on the FETAC accredited subjects necessary for the qualification.

Different ways of knowing - adult learners' experiential knowledge

The documentary data showed that the ethos underpinning the course was based on the assumption that students already had what they need to learn and that much of the course content could be drawn from their life experience. Such an ethos is in keeping with Knowles's (1980) theory of andragogy where he posits that adult learners draw on their prior experience and knowledge as a resource in current learning. However Avis (1995) argues that learners' experience only counts if it yields 'an appropriate form of knowledge'. The findings showed that tutors encouraged adult learners to draw on their own experiential knowledge but generally only within certain subjects and contexts where their experiences of caring were used to exemplify certain aspects of theory and practice. Here learners' experiences can be seen as a form of capital on which they can draw. Bowl (2003) also found that the learners in her study who were mostly women were largely drawn to the 'more-people centred areas of the higher education curriculum, which appear to be areas close to 'everyday thought and experience'.

The limited validation of and the potential for acknowledgement of learners' experiential knowledge is reflective of Illeris's (2007, p84) observation that in adult education experiential learning is often seen as somewhat 'in opposition' to 'school learning'. Although tutors drew on learners' experiential knowledge in class the data showed that some learners experienced difficulties in assessment when they found that prior experiential knowledge was often not validated in the academic practices of writing assignments, reports and examinations. For example the examinations for Human Growth and Development, Legal Studies and Social Studies are all theory-based. This ties in with Bufton's (2006) study where she contends that learning the 'academic stance' is about being able to detach oneself emotionally from personal experiences and anecdotal evidence and that the everyday language 'that hugs the ground of experience' (Charlesworth, 2000 cited in Bufton, 2006) is not recognised as the language of the academic stance. In the adult learner curriculum learners' experiential knowledge as capital is valued for its role in exemplifying aspects of theory but has limited value in most of the formal academic assessments in the course. It is used as a 'pedagogic device' and in this way adult learners' 'experience is used didactically and selectively to support the argument developed by the teacher (Avis, 1995).

The Work Experience module is the main subject (other than a limited number of SLOs in some additional modules) that is based around experiential learning and skills development. In the work placement learners' skills and experience were validated. The data showed that some adult learners chose work placement areas that they were already familiar with from their own lives. Their experiential knowledge was recognised and valued by work placement

supervisors as well as given currency in work placement reports in terms of marks⁴⁰.

The FETAC Work Experience module also has an Accreditation of Prior Experience, Achievement and Learning (APEAL) route (Appendix 9). FETAC state that this route is designed to enable learners to gain accreditation for 'current or prior experience of work in a vocational area directly related to the certificate being sought. The experience of work in either case must be substantial, verifiable and relevant to the vocational certificate area'.

In the study the majority of learners did not have sufficient/any prior experience in the social care field (or what they had was not recognised) to pursue the APEAL route. Although they had the 'caring capital' of their own personal experiences as family carers this capital of informal caring was not legitimated for assessment purposes. However the APEAL route is not used either in another adult learner course (FETAC Childcare award) although the majority of participants are already childcare practitioners. There is no culture in the college of using the APEAL mode. Hanson (1996) suggests that it is difficult to bring together experiential learning and academic study while Peters et al (1999, p3) in their study of APEL in higher education found that some lecturers feared a 'diminution of quality' with a key concern being the 'value' of experiential learning. The challenge here for the course team is to find ways that can marry and validate learners' experiential knowledge. Whaley (1999) cited in Bamber and Tett (2000) acknowledges that a key issue for those working with adult learners is how to show them the ways in which it can be

⁴⁰ A work placement supervisor's report for the Work Experience module is worth 30% of the overall marks

used in an academic context. It points to the necessity of preparing adult learners for the academic practices of assessment where their experience may not be validated while at the same time identifying and valuing both the knowledges they bring with them and those they need in order to access employment and/or higher education.

Summary

Theoretical knowledge was largely privileged over technical knowledge and skills in the adult learner curriculum. Greater legitimacy was offered to FETAC accredited subjects as they were perceived to offer greater capitals for learners than non-accredited subjects. Learners rejected the non-accredited subjects not only because of their lack of relevance and value for them but also because they did not reflect their input and interests. Rejection of the non-accredited subjects implied the rejection of the aspirational behaviour of the 'rounded' student and the construction of 'à la carte' learners. However this view denigrates student autonomy. Several aspirational behaviours and identities are evident here ranging from the 'à la carte' learner, the strategic learner and the learner for whom being a student is only one part of their identity. A challenge here for practice is to find ways that accommodate and legitimate complementary rather than competing aspirational behaviours and identities.

Learners' experiential knowledge had limited validity in assessment practices and an emergent tension is how to marry and validate learners' experience and yet prepare them for the academic practices where experiential knowledge does not have significance. This raises a potential area of challenge for the course

noted in the data in Chapter 4 concerning the ‘difficulties associated with integrating the mainstream education ethos with that of adult education’.

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of capital?

The data showed that the main way through which adult learners came to access more privileged forms of capital was through acceptance of the desired aspirational behaviours constructed through the practices of learning the ‘college knowledge’ of FE (the social and academic practices), through assessment and ‘becoming legitimate’ via accreditation. Each of these offered adult learners greater access to the currencies of symbolic, social and cultural capitals.

Learning ‘college knowledge’

Referring to mature students in higher education Fleming and Murphy (1997) describe the culture of university as ‘college knowledge’ which is akin to ‘learning the tricks of the trade’ and giving back to tutors what they wanted in assignments, written work and exams. In this study the ‘college knowledge’ or culture of further education is similar – learning the social and academic practices needed in order to fit in and take on the aspirational identity of the adult learner, learning the ‘accepted norms and practices’ of the institutional habitus (Zepke et al, 2006, p589).

In this study adult learners came to know what this knowledge was and how to harness it through their engagement with tutors in the classroom, assessment practices and through building and developing their social networks of support.

Many adult learners in this study felt very out of place at the beginning of the course and one of the key things that helped them to fit in was the support of tutors and fellow students. Students supported each other both academically and emotionally and tutors recognised and encouraged these networks of support. As R9 commented 'we all looked out for each other'. This was also noted by Thomas (2002b) in her study of social capital and student retention who found that relations between students/tutors and students/peers were key to the sense of fitting in and this raises an issue for practice as to how the institutional habitus might foster and develop the social capital (friendships, support etc) that adult learners bring with them to the course. It also reflects the different communities of practice (for example social and academic) that adult learners acquired membership of and how they learned through discussion with and observation of each other's practices and experiences as well as through formal practices in classes such as the study skills class, for example. Lave and Wenger (1991, p114) observe that 'a learning curriculum is a field of learning resources in everyday practice *viewed from the perspective of learners*'.

Relationships with tutors were also fundamental to helping adult learners fit in and come to know what was expected of them. Learners worked harder for those tutors who had higher expectations of them. As R11 noted 'basically, the ones that respected you more you would work harder for them than the ones that didn't really expect much off you'. These findings are in keeping with the empirical work of Thomas (2002a) and Bowl (2003).

Many learners experienced difficulty in coming to know what was expected of them in terms of academic performance. A key problem was that of learning to

write in an unfamiliar 'academic' way. This highlighted one of the ways in which there was dissonance between their habituses and the institutional habitus. For Bruffee (1993) cited in Murphy and Fleming (2000) adult students coming into university are 'already functioning members of a knowledge community'. They are 'fluent in the language of experience and common-sense'. The data showed that all of the adult students in the study who had progressed to higher level courses stressed the importance of learning the academic practices of writing, doing assignment work and examinations. They did not discount the work experience nor the technical knowledge gained but they felt that the theoretical knowledge and practices gained in the course were essential for moving on to higher level courses. For them it amounted to learning 'to become a member of a different learning community' (Bruffee, 1993).

Assessment

Assessment is one of the main ways through which adult learners come to know their place in relation to academic achievement and in relation to others. The findings showed that possibly the biggest fear for adults learners was the fear of failure around assessment. They did not know what would be expected of them and thought if they did not pass they would be asked to leave. These fears were largely underpinned by anxieties relating to prior school experiences. Tutors and managers were only too well aware of the impact of assessment processes for adult learners. Assessment, as R12 noted, showed up 'their shortcomings painfully and very brutally'.

The processes and outcomes of assessment act as a gatekeeper regulating access to symbolic and cultural capitals. Bowl (2003) examined adult learners' experiences of access and found that one of the struggles for students was around the academic language required in assessment. She observed that learners have to learn to write in 'a style and language appropriate to higher education' yet this style was not explicitly taught and this is supported by the findings in this study. This was another form of capital that students did not possess and had to gain. As R4 commented, 'I never even heard of a bibliography until I came here, true as God. I thought it was something out of the bible, you know'.

Learners who have learned the types of knowledges that are legitimated and who can reproduce this in the format required for assessment purposes are rewarded with the capital of a grade or score. Feedback on performance gives learners guidance as to the desired aspirational behaviour for assessment. Adult learners found that the feedback 'pointed you in the right direction...it tells you what you've done well but more importantly how you could improve' (R21). Although learners worried about grades and where they stood the findings in this study did not support the view of Knowles (1988) who states that adults feel 'childlike' when judged by other adults. As the course progressed adult learners commented that they learned not only from the feedback but also from the process of doing assignments and as R23 (focus group) remarked 'when I read back over one of my first assignments I thought 'oh God, did I really hand that in?'

The assessment requirements over the two years of the course were heavy with each FETAC subject carrying anything from two to ten pieces of work. For adult learners the stakes of assessment were high with each completed module counting towards the symbolic capital of accreditation to be accrued at the end. Despite gaining that capital and using it to access higher education R4 still experienced the same fears of failure, 'I'm just hoping to God I don't make a mess of it. That's what terrifies me, you know because I'm after telling everybody I'm going and sure as God if I make a mess of it I'll have to say oh I failed'.

Becoming legitimate – accreditation

The findings showed that gaining the qualification was extremely important for adult learners. Many of them regarded it as a means of changing themselves and their lives and as a means of moving out of low status employment. Returning to education was also important for adult learners as a means of 'settling old scores' (McFadden, 1995) and making up for what they had missed out earlier often through no fault of their own. The findings in the study are in keeping with those of Walters (2000) who found that many adult learners coming back to education wanted to 'set the record straight in relation to education'.

Tutors had mixed feelings about accreditation. They recognised its importance but some felt that the focus on accreditation had become 'the be all and the end all' leaving little or no room for learners who wanted to come back to education for its own sake. As R16 commented, 'we're probably teaching them that

getting the piece of paper is very important, we've moved away from...em...having learners attend because they just want to study'.

The documentary data also showed that the course is positioned in college promotional material as an entry level qualification in social care. Tutors also positioned it as a bridge to further/higher education or employment. Tutors also had mixed feelings about the currency of the FETAC qualification particularly in relation to employment. As R7 observed, 'nobody is eh, you know, fooled into believing once they have a FETAC award that they can go out and get some magnificent job. There's a sense of realism that this is a stepping stone'. R7's comment ties in with the view of one of the respondents in a study by Warmington (2003) of mature students on access courses, 'there's no guarantee that if you get all these wonderful qualifications that you're guaranteed a job'.

However for R9 the FETAC qualification meant, 'I can work now, I've got...I hope I have the certificate because you need that to work'. For her it was the capital she had come to college to gain and she now wanted to exercise its currency. Warmington (2003) also found that mature students displayed 'widespread conviction of the dominance of the qualifications system' in relation to gaining employment.

As adult education policy in Ireland moves towards one of emphasising skills acquisition and individual responsibility in gaining credentials and qualifications I question whether current practices in the return to education course can still be facilitative of learners who do not want to work towards the full qualification

and are interested in learning as an end in itself. Over the years that the course has been running I have observed that increasing numbers of adult learners are strongly of the opinion that 'you need a qualification for everything these days' (Warmington, 2003). They feel that they need to achieve the certification in order to improve their own individual situations. Learners felt that they needed the qualification to break into a world hither to which they did not belong as they did not possess the right kinds of capital. Likewise Drudy and Lynch (1993) comment that 'Irish society is one in which educational credential are a pre-condition for occupational success'.

The development of the NFQ and the higher education links scheme both contribute towards this growing emphasis on accreditation as symbolic capital for progression to higher education. The graduate profiles in the college prospectus emphasised the currency of the course as capital to gain access to higher education. Likewise some tutors interviewed placed greater emphasis on progression to higher education rather than employment as R1 commented, 'I would feel that they get more of a further study message from us... they've returned to this, they've managed this and what better opportunity do they have than go on to third level now'.

Summary

Capitals are a form of resource and as Swartz (1997, p73) notes 'individuals and groups draw upon a variety of cultural, social and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order'. The adult learners in this study were aware of the importance of gaining accreditation as a way of moving on and moving up and saw it as the means to gain the capitals necessary

to access greater employment opportunities and educational chances. Accessing more privileged forms of capital involves the development of practices that result from the interaction of learners' habituses and capitals and the field of the return to education programme. The greater the degree of differential between the habituses and capitals of adults returning to education and the institutional habitus the more difficult it will be for adult learners to 'fit in' and gain access to the more privileged capitals. At stake here are the symbolic capitals of credentials and accreditation, the social capitals of relationships and networks built through practices (e.g. work experience) and relationships with learners and tutors and the cultural capital of the knowledges recognised and valorised in higher education and the struggle to access these capitals takes place within the field of the processes, practices and relationships of the adult learner curriculum.

Through which practices in the educational institution are the desired aspirational behaviours co-constructed?

One of the key findings from this study is that there was a significant tension for tutors around the ways in which our expectations of adult learners impacted on the nature and type of supports offered to them. Learners who progressed to higher level courses also commented on being aware of different tutors' expectations and of the ways in which learners were treated differently in the return to education course. Although adult learners found the ethos in the college to be very supportive towards them, when it came to classroom practices and some of the support practices in the course many of the learners in the study were also aware of the tension between expectations and support which is evident in the interview data from tutors.

Thomas (2002a) cautioned that educational institutions need to understand the impact of their practices on students' sense of acceptance in the setting and this raised a key area of investigation for this study. I highlighted for exploration the extent to which the institutional habitus of the college is enhanced by the 'open door' policy (of tutors and managers) which is intended to foster supportive relationships between staff and students. The 'open door' policy under scrutiny includes such practices as in-built study support class and individual study support; availability of tutors outside of class time; taking up draft assignment work and giving feedback; going through assignment work in class; concessions in relation to attendance and assignment submission deadlines.

The work of Little (1975) cited in McInnis (2002) on learning climates provides an incisive framework with which to analyse the support structures in the return to education course and to re-conceptualise the institutional habitus of the college in relation to adult learners. These learning climates are discussed in Chapter 2 but they are worth summarising here. The neglecting climate is one where 'demands are low and support is low'. It appears to foster autonomy but the outcome is minimal achievement with the possible withdrawal of the student from learning. An indulging climate places low demands and student performance is hardly stressed at all. There is strong reassurance of the person yet it encourages a dependent learner. In the training climate both guidance and demands are high. However there is minimal attention given to student support and self-knowledge thus fostering a climate that valorises the 'dutiful' student with emphasis on performance and results. Finally, the cultivating climate is one that attaches a high importance to both demands and performance but also

to student support and self-knowledge. In this climate support and expectations of learners are high and it seeks to cultivate an autonomous learner.

The findings in this study showed strong evidence of both the indulging climate and the cultivating climate in the practices in the adult learner curriculum. The indulging climate (driven by the aspirational myth of the adult learner in need of and deserving of support) was particularly evident in what could be perceived to be lax practices around attendance, classroom practice and concessions around assignment deadlines. Personal support for learners was strong because, as has been found in studies by Walker et al (2006) and Mc Aleavy et al (2004), tutors' support for adult learners was not solely restricted to learners' academic progress and endeavours but was also concerned with learners' personal lives and individual circumstances. However there was little pressure on learners to perform, expectations were low and the aspirational behaviours allowed learners to submit late work constantly, to attend erratically (both accredited and non-accredited classes) and to disrupt classes. Although supportive this climate unintentionally fostered dependence through its practices.

Both tutors and learners were active in the co-construction of these behaviours. This is evident in the interview data where most learners who progressed to higher level courses were appreciative yet critical of some of the practices in the return to education curriculum. They needed the support around assignment work, study skills and theoretical knowledge in order to move on to higher level courses but when it came to tutors' practices on the higher level course it came as 'a complete wake up call' when they realised they were no longer being

'mothered'. This ties in with Fleming and Murphy's (1998, p41) study of mature students in HE where they found the closer an access to HE course came in 'content and method' to an adult education course, the less likely it was seen as good preparation for the tasks of university level study. As noted in their study, 'warm and cosy' was not what university was all about'.

The cultivating climate was most evident in the practices of study support (both class and individual), tutors' accepting draft assignments and tutors' general approachability and availability for students. All the learners interviewed found that being able to submit draft assignments and gain from the feedback was very beneficial but were aware that it wasn't a practice done throughout the college. Most tutors felt that flexibility coupled with strong supports were essential particularly in the early stages to enable adult learners gain the academic literacies they needed for the learning and assessment not only for this course but for higher level courses. This is supported by Bufton (2006) and by Bamber et al (1997); Bamber and Tett (1999, 2000) and Tett (2004). In their research into the LAST⁴¹ project Bamber and Tett reported as one of their most significant findings the need for educators to build 'supportive structures as part of a course culture' including such supports as intensive practice and tutoring in writing...study skills...from verbal and written feedback on draft work by tutors and from coaching on how to improve work prior to submission (Bamber and Tett (1999, 2000). Yet this is counter to the views of Torrance et al (2005) who argue that extensive use of 'coaching' helps learners to succeed at 'criteria compliance' rather than at independent learning. There is often a very

⁴¹ As noted on page 81, the LAST project was set up in 1995 to 'enable academically unqualified activists from working-class communities, disabled people and minority ethnic groups to gain the BA in Community Education in an elite institution

fine line between supporting and facilitating learning through discussion of the assessment criteria of a particular piece of work and actually prescribing what should be done in order to meet those criteria. This indicates another area in curriculum practices where support can unintentionally foster dependence and undermine adult learners.

This cultivating climate with its high levels of support needs to be problematised against the notion of the adult learners as self-directed. McInnis (2002) defines the independent or self-directed learner is someone able to operate without the close direction of a teacher. Merriam (1998, p56) found that while much of the theoretical literature in adult education puts forward a view of learners as self-directed and in control of their learning, data from empirical studies often reveals that many adult learners do not either know how or want to take control of their learning and do not know how to access supports. In this study the conceptualisation of the adult returner in the data did not support the idea of a self-directed autonomous learner coming into the course. Tutors expected learners to need help, direction and support. Likewise Belzar (2004) found that some adult learners in her study found difficulty with self-directed individual or small group work because they felt they should and needed to have tutor direction. The aim of tutors' support practices in the return to education course was to 'move them on' towards more independent learning so that more mainstream courses would not come 'as a complete shock to them' (R16). The data showed that as the course progressed many of the learners interviewed felt they had become more independent in their learning. Hanson (1996, p101) points out the need for 'institutional and curriculum reform to stress autonomy, individuality and self-direction' yet there is also the

need for strong student support. The findings show that in the return to education course adult learners need support to help them acquire the social and academic practices necessary to gain more legitimate forms of capital. However a major challenge for the course team is learning how to reduce the indulging learning climate and develop more fully a cultivating climate without tutors and learners feeling support is being withdrawn. It requires a complete renegotiation of how 'support' is conceptualised and how the unintentional spin off of fostering dependence can be disentangled from our practices.

The data does not support the findings of Macdonald and Stratta's (2001) study on institutional attitudes to non-traditional access students. In their study tutors felt that learning should be students' 'own business' and not the responsibility of tutors to put in place supports to help them. This is strongly reflective of a neglecting learning climate (Little, 1975) cited in McInnis (2002). In this study none of the data provides evidence of a neglecting climate. A study by Keane (2006) on Irish academics' responses to non-traditional students found that while tutors strongly affirmed the necessity for change at institutional level they all emphasised the need for *all* students to have the 'required level' of academic ability for entry. This has relevance for the concept of 'open entry' raised in an earlier chapter. In this study tutors and managers were highly aware of the challenges that open entry brought for learners themselves and for their own practices. They supported learners' aspirations to succeed in both practical and emotional terms.

Summary

While tutors believed they engaged in supportive practices in order to facilitate independent learning and transition to more mainstream courses they expressed concern over whether concessions made for adult learners could be construed as undermining rather than as supportive practices. The findings showed evidence of two main learning climates in the course and this is where one of the key conflicts arises – there is ambiguity and tension existent amongst the different climates and different tutors operate using different climates. The institutional habitus of the college is largely caught between an indulging and cultivating learning climate. The institutional habitus is enhanced by the ‘open door’ policy to the extent that these practices aim to foster learners’ autonomy and facilitate their accessing social, cultural and symbolic capitals. However by unintentionally fostering dependence through some of its practices the institutional habitus could be seen to be undermining adult learners’ autonomy and the challenge here for the course team is to relocate the practices in a cultivating climate.

Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a discussion of the key findings in the study and has shown how the data has illuminated the research questions and raised issues for argument and discussion. I discussed the findings in relation to the theoretical and empirical literature in Chapter 2 and I have drawn out implications for practice which will be now picked up in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions

The myth perpetuates because it is functional within the context of the educational setting

St Clair (2004, p92)

Introduction

In this study I set out to explore the ways in which adult learners come to know their place and learn who or how to be when they return to formal education. I wanted to examine the practices in the adult learner curriculum through which the conceptualisation of what it meant to be an adult learner was co-constructed. My argument was that adult learners needed to learn the practices necessary to fit into to the culture of the return to education course in order to gain access to more privileged forms of capital that would in turn open up greater employment and educational opportunities for them.

This chapter will firstly summarise briefly how the key findings in the study illuminated the research questions. I then evaluate the extent to which the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's analytical tools of capital, field and habitus and St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth of the adult learner identity have offered a critical lens for this study in the light of the findings. I consider the implications of the methodological approach and the data collection methods in view of the findings. I examine the contribution the study makes to the field of adult education and I outline the implications of the study for future research and practice in this area.

Summary of key findings

This study found that there were two dimensions to the aspirational myth of the adult learner identity one constructed around the other. The first constructed the adult learner whom we expected to come on the course as someone lacking in basic educational qualifications, juggling multiple roles and perceived as both in need and deserving of support. The second component was that of whom we expected them to be and to become during the course. Both constructions had implications for practices in the adult learner curriculum.

In the adult learner curriculum theoretical knowledge was given privilege over technical knowledge and skills and accredited subjects were given privilege over non-accredited subjects by both learners and tutors. Adult learners' experiential knowledge had limited validation in the academic practices of assessment. The course offered more privileged forms of capital (symbolic, cultural and social) and adult learners were facilitated access to these through gaining 'college knowledge' and learning to fit in, through assessment and through 'becoming legitimate' via accreditation.

There were conflicting messages for adult learners as to what it meant to be an 'adult learner' on the course with different expectations transmitted through classroom and support practices. The study highlighted a key tension between tutors' commitment to fully supporting adult learners and their concern that some practices may create learner dependency rather than fostering independence and autonomy.

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's analytical tools of capital, habitus and field and St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth afforded a significant analytical lens through which to conduct this study. Both offered important contributions towards understanding the diverse social practices and relationships within the return to education course.

Capital

Bourdieu's concept of capital has provided an important tool through which to analyse not only the resources that adult learners bring with them when they return to education but those that can be accessed through education. An important part of this analysis is the recognition (or lack of it) given to different forms of capital. In this study symbolic capital denoted the capitals of qualifications and accreditation, social capital denoted the relationships and networks established through college practices and cultural capital the academic knowledge valued and recognised in higher education. Although most of the adult learners in the study did not bring recognised capital in the form of general educational qualifications, many of them brought the cultural resource or capital of 'caring' from their life experiences. This was seen as a capital they could build upon but one that required legitimation through accreditation. They were able to harness this in the work placement and were encouraged to draw on it as a referent in some class discussions. They also built on the social capital they brought with them (many knew each other prior to the course) in relation to developing relationships and forming support networks in the class group.

Part of the process of coming to know their place and fitting in was gaining capital in the form of the academic and social practices necessary in order to move on to either employment or further/higher education. In this study more privileged forms of capitals are gained through the process of returning to education, through assessment and through accreditation. The capitals at stake the symbolic capital of accreditation, the cultural capital of the knowledge valued in higher education and the social capital gained through building relationships and social networks.

Habitus

The concept of habitus has been fundamental to the analysis in this research. Firstly the idea of the institutional habitus as mediator has helped to illuminate the culture and ethos of return to education course and show how the different values and assumptions underpinning the curriculum and also those of tutors and managers are evident in the practices in the course. The concept of habitus gives explanatory power to the exploration of adult learners' identity as both a sense of themselves but also a sense of self in relation to others and to the analysis of the ways in which adult learners come to know their place. As Reay (2004, p437) suggests 'habitus is a way of looking at data which renders the 'taken-for-granted' problematic' noting that habitus suggests questions for research such as the degree of adaptation of an individual to the context in which they find themselves and how their responses to that context are shaped by 'their personal history'. When the habituses of adult learners coming back to education are not in congruence with the institutional habitus a sense of disjunction or 'being out of place' occurs. The institutional habitus and its relation to the learning climate in the course is deserving of further attention. A

learning climate is seen as a product of support and orientation (guidance to and demands of students) and therefore it embodies the institutional habitus.

Field

For Bourdieu it is the interaction of habitus and capital within a field that yields practice (or agency). In this study the field or social world under scrutiny was that of the return to education course and its associated practices within the wider field of further education in Ireland. The field of the return to education course is the site where the struggle for access to and legitimation of capitals takes place. The concept of field helped towards an understanding of the ways in which different capitals (for example knowledges, social practices) of adult learners are recognised and validated (or not) and the types of capitals that are available to adult learners.

Although Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field have provided a solid theoretical framework for this thesis nonetheless it is important to consider the potential criticism of Bourdieu's concepts in relation to this study. For example, the concepts of field and habitus do reflect social influences on people's behaviour and Bourdieu's concepts could be criticised in relation to issues of an individual's agency and choice. Also his sociological analysis of education related to the French education system which is very different to the context of adult education in FE in Ireland.

Several empirical studies in this thesis have argued that by and large the institutional habitus of educational institutions are reluctant to adapt to adult learners' needs expecting instead that adult learners must adapt to the

institution, for example Macdonald and Stratta (2001); Bowl (2003) and Keane (2006). However in this study the dynamic nature of the field and the way in which the institutional habitus has responded and adapted to adult learners' habituses is evident in a number of different ways. In response to both adult learners' criticisms of the relevance of the maths class and their 'voting with their feet' by not attending maths was removed from the timetable. The findings in Chapter 4 also shows how the curriculum was revised and expanded to include additional FETAC modules many of which were at the request of the learners who felt that these additional subjects would enhance their qualification for both accessing higher education and seeking employment. These examples show the influence of learners' agency and the way in which the institutional habitus is reflective of a dynamic two-way process with learners influencing the institution and the institution influencing learners. At the time of writing there have also been changes in the different types of assessment methods and techniques used with increased use of audio and audio-visual assessment methods.

Aspirational myth

St Clair's (2004) concept of the aspirational myth has provided a significant analytical tool for this study for interrogating and helping to illuminate the notion of adult learner identity, subject positioning and sense of place in the return to education course. The findings showed how different conceptualisations of the aspirational identity (e.g. in need of and deserving of support) led to diverse expectations of adult learners, desired aspirational behaviours and impacted on support practices in the return to education course.

As noted by St Clair one of the important caveats to the notion of the aspirational myth is that it is partial, situated and contextual. The aspirational myths and behaviours discussed in this study are those related to the adult learner curriculum in the return to education course. If the aspirational myth of the adult learner identity was related to the institutional habitus of the college rather than to that of the return to education course it is likely that a different set of myths and behaviours would be uncovered.

This study has used the concept of the aspirational myth to explore the practices in the adult learner curriculum but from the viewpoint of adult learners, tutors and managers and through analysis of documentary data thereby building on the work of St Clair. The study has shown that the aspirational myth is a co-construction of learners, tutors and managers and is part of the institutional habitus.

The research journey

The research journey followed anything but a smooth and linear path. To characterise the journey I draw on Lamott (1994, p93, 94) where she equates solving problems in creative writing with that of trying to put an octopus to bed:

You get a bunch of the octopus's arms neatly tucked under the covers – that is you've come up with a plot, resolved the conflict between the two main characters...but two arms are still flailing around...finally you get those arms under the sheets too, and are

about to turn off the lights when another long sucking arm breaks
free

The process of conducting this research has been challenging, thought-provoking and rewarding but with many flailing arms along the way. At times, in the words of one the adult learners in relation to assignment work, 'it wrecked my head'. Nonetheless what I have gained through the process of engaging with the theoretical, empirical and methodological literature, collecting and analysing the data and writing up the research has been immense. As with any research study there are things that I might have done differently. For example, I would have liked to have interviewed adult learners who left the course early, those who had completed the course but not gone into either employment or further education and male students as their accounts would have contributed a different perspective to the aspirational myth and I recognise their absence as a limitation of this study. A delimitation of the study which could possibly be viewed as a limitation is while the research focused specifically solely on the practices in the adult learner curriculum (because of its scope) a comparison study of the ways in which the aspirational myth of adult learner identity and the institutional habitus are operational in more mainstream courses in the college would afford a greater understanding of the ways in which adult learners throughout the college come to fit in through gaining the social and academic practices of 'college knowledge' and the ways in which this knowledge helps to afford them access to greater forms of capital.

Limitations of the case study approach

Every research approach and design has its limitations and the case study is no exception. For the purposes of this research a case study approach was the one

that best fitted the aim and purposes of the study – that of exploring and gaining an understanding of the processes and practices in the adult learner curriculum through which adult learners returning to education come to know their place and fit in. However Hamel (1993) cited in Merriam (1998, p43) warns about the potential lack of rigour in ‘the collection, construction and analysis of the empirical materials that give rise the study’. Noting the fact that in case study research the researcher is the primary medium for data collection and analysis, Merriam (1998, p42) observes that ‘qualitative case studies are limited by the sensitivity and integrity of the researcher’ and Hayes (2006, p11) observes that case studies tell ‘a truth *not* the truth...they are always partial accounts, constructions of reality or representations’. My way of minimising the risk of these criticisms being levelled at my work was to provide as full, detailed, transparent and reflexive account as possible of the entire research journey.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) cited in Merriam (1998, p42) warn that case studies can either ‘oversimplify or exaggerate a situation’ suggesting that they should be viewed as ‘a slice of life’. Taking up Guba and Lincoln’s term I would suggest that this study aimed to provide that. I was however conscious that this study was a partial construction and that within the return to education course there were many different realities. So the study presents a ‘slice of life’ in relation to the adult learner curriculum. Through conducting this study I feel that I have provided an exploration of the adult learner curriculum that exposes the key tensions embedded in it and opens it up for a greater understanding of how the practices work towards facilitating or denying adult learners access to more privileged forms of capital.

Implications for policy and practice

The aim of the study was to examine the practices in the adult learner curriculum through which adult learners come to know their place and fit in when returning to formal education. I argued this was necessary in order for them to gain access to more privileged forms of capital thereby increasing their employment and educational opportunities. The key findings from this study raise a number of important issues in the practices of the adult learner curriculum and from the findings I identify three main areas for discussion in relation to practice which I discuss in turn. Firstly the potency or the explanatory power of the aspirational myth, secondly the tension around the dual purpose nature of the adult learner curriculum and thirdly the promotion of a cultivating learning climate in the adult learner curriculum.

Competing or complementary aspirational myths?

St Clair (2004, p92) notes that the aspirational myth is not something that is imposed on learners, it is 'a construction with learners actively contributing to its shape and influence'. Nonetheless he argues that there are advantages to 'the acceptance of the aspirational myth, not least that it clarifies acceptance both in terms of how learners are expected to behave and in terms of the gains open to them'. The findings in this study show that there are different aspirational myths of the adult learner identity in the course and the challenge is whether these can complement each other rather than be in conflict. For example, the aspirational myth of the aspirational identity of the 'all round' learner who attends every subject is contrasted against the myth of the 'à la carte learner' who is selective in terms of the subjects he/she attends. However the rather negative construction of the 'à la carte' learner could be interpreted differently

as the 'strategic' adult learner who is juggling many identities of which 'student' is only one. Because of this the strategic learner has to focus on the subjects that are most important for attaining the goal of accreditation and the associated capital. The challenge for practice is that of accommodating a diversity of aspirational myths and developing an institutional habitus that is more accommodating and supportive of adult learners' habituses and enables them to learn the necessary social and academic practices to fit in thereby opening up access to greater capitals and greater employment, educational and life chances.

The adult learner curriculum - vocational or academic?

One of the key tensions emerging from the findings in this study is that embedded in the broad aims of the adult learner curriculum of trying to provide both an accredited vocational qualification and a general broad-based education for adult learners in order to facilitate learners accessing both the symbolic capital of accreditation and the cultural capital valued in higher education. The findings showed that privilege is given by both learners and tutors to accredited subjects and the non-assessed general education subjects that were to be an integral part of the curriculum have largely been replaced by additional FETAC accredited subjects. Adult learners did not see the relevance of the non-accredited subjects and as one manager noted 'they voted with their feet'.

In Chapter 6 I suggested that one potential way forward for curriculum development was to offer a core curriculum of mandatory subjects for the particular FETAC award offered and a choice of optional additional subjects. However this could further add to the very tension that results from trying to

offer both an academic and a vocational qualification. In the light of this there are three possible potential directions:

1. Retain the course in its current format
2. Focus solely on the vocational remit of the course enabling learners to gain symbolic capital in the form of the FETAC accredited qualification with no additional general education subjects included
3. Retain the FETAC Community and Health Services award to offer symbolic capital of accreditation thus offering greater employment chances and a platform into higher level vocational courses. At the same time develop a new adult education course offering a FETAC Level 5 Certificate in Liberal Arts (Appendix 10). This is a newly available award since June 2008⁴². It is designed as an Access to higher education and is not a vocational qualification. In contrast to the Community and Health Services award the focus is on gaining the cultural capital valued in higher education.

Learning climates

The findings showed strong evidence of both the indulging learning climate and the cultivating climate in the practices in the adult learner curriculum. The institutional habitus of the adult learner curriculum in the return to education course is caught between an indulging and cultivating learning climate. Tutors expressed concern that their support practices may be fostering dependence rather than autonomy and independence. The findings showed that while adult

⁴² Up to June 2008 this award was restricted to certain centres but has now become available to every registered FETAC centre

learners felt they had gained important knowledge and skills in terms of the academic and social practices - 'college knowledge' – to move on to higher level courses they were critical of some of the practices in the return to education course which they felt were too accommodating and open to manipulation.

The challenge here is how to move towards a cultivating climate where there are high levels of support for adult learners along with high expectations and the aim is to foster adult learners' autonomy and independence. But how? O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2007, p235) note that teachers of adult learners need to 'be self-conscious of the dual effects of their own habitus and the prevailing influence of educational ideology on their classroom practices'. An interim evaluation report for the course (2002) noted a potential difficulty for the course might be that of trying to marry an adult education ethos with the ethos of mainstream education. In the light of this and O'Brien and O'Fathaigh's observations the institutional habitus of a more cultivating learning climate could be one where tutors recognise how their own habituses are influenced by the mainstream education ethos which in the context of this study one where flexibility and recognition of difference and 'otherness' are afforded little recognition. Pertinent also is the observation by O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2007, p175) earlier in this thesis that limited time and resources available in FE colleges means that interventions end up as 'paternalistic/maternalistic responses' rather than being able to confront the system operating in further education. Re-conceptualising what we mean by 'support' is paramount yet is by no means easy when it is tied up with connotations of leniency and dependency and subject to constraints.

Implications for future research

As noted by St Clair (2004) the aspirational myth is partial, situational and contextual. The scope of this research was contained to exploring the practices in one adult education course however the aspirational myth could be studied in the wider context of the college by looking at other courses where adult learners are part of the wider class group. Also, building on comments by two of the respondents in this study (tutor and manager) that the ethos towards adult learners was different in the college compared with their experience of other colleges there is therefore scope and potential for using the theoretical framework in this study to explore the aspirational myth of the adult learner identity in other return to education courses in other colleges of further education to examine commonalities and differences and to explore how different practices and ways of working with adult learners could contribute not only to practice but also to the limited body of empirical research on adult learners in further education.

Reflection on aims of the study

This study set out to explore the ways in which different conceptualisations of the aspirational myth of the adult learner identity are co-constructed and the practices in the adult learner curriculum through which adult learners come to know their place and fit in when returning to education. I argued that adult learners needed to learn the social and academic practices of college knowledge in order to fit in so that they could access more privileged forms of capital thereby opening up greater educational and employment chances. Mayo and Collymore (2000) cited in McGivney (2005, p55) examine the purpose of the curriculum asking is it:

'to transmit and reinforce existing norms and values or to promote critical reflection leading to challenge and social change – or both? Is the prime objective the attainment of 'useful knowledge' – instrumental skills and training – or really useful knowledge – which enables people to make sense of the hardships and oppression they experience in their daily lives, and to develop strategies for greater equality and social justice...[...]...and is the emphasis upon individual advancement alone or is there also room for group support and collective benefits for the local community?

An interim course evaluation noted that it was hoped through a 'targeted approach to second-chance education' that members of the local community would 'be empowered to participate in, for example, employment, further education and community activism' (Evaluation report, p14). Carrying out this study has exposed tensions within the practices of the adult learner curriculum whereby the institutional habitus of the course is caught between an indulging climate (fostering dependency) and a cultivating one (fostering independence and autonomy) resulting in the co-construction of conflicting aspirational myths of adult learner identity and ambiguity around the aspirational behaviours of what it means to be an adult learner. The aim of the research was to explore the practices through which adult returners come to learn how to fit in with the aim of affording them access to greater forms of capital through a supportive and facilitative institutional habitus. In the light of this and the questions posed by Mayo and Collymore I feel that gaining greater clarity of understanding of the practices in the adult learner curriculum is the first step towards equipping adult learners with the skills, knowledges and greater forms of capital to open

up greater life chances and self-change for them. This personal change may then be the catalyst for a wider social change from the impact on the person's family, social and community networks.

Concluding comments

The idea for this study arose about seven years ago when I happened to hear a throwaway remark 'Who do *they* think they are!' in response to an adult learner who had the temerity to open and put her head around the staffroom door. I am grateful to that adult learner. By opening that staff-room door all those years ago she set in train the first niggling thoughts and questions that came to form the basis for this empirical study. During the course of this study I have learned so much about who they think they are, who we think they are and most importantly about the different implications of these conceptualisations of the adult learner identity for our practices in the return to education course and curriculum. It is therefore fitting that I leave the final words to one of the adult learners who participated in this study:

It was like two educations, learning about people and learning about facts. Two going on at the same time, it was amazing, it really was. And sometimes by watching other people interacting you learn more than if you were trying to figure it out for yourself, you know. It's like watching a little play only it's life, real life (R4)

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Glossary of terms

Adult Guidance Initiative – the Adult Educational Guidance initiative was established in 2000 resulting from the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life (2000). Up to 2000 there was no guidance and counselling services for adult learners. The Adult Educational Guidance Initiative consists of 38 guidance projects throughout the country with the aim of providing a quality adult educational guidance service to participants in VTOS, literacy and other adult and community education programmes nationwide.

BTEI - Back To Education Initiative – this initiative came fully on stream in 2002 having been piloted since 1999. Developed by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and part-funded by the DES and the European Social Fund it aims to provide opportunities to return to learning for young people and adults. It is designed as a re-entry route for those in the workplace who wish to upgrade their skills in line with emerging needs. The emphasis of the BTEI is on part-time educational provision and it offers free tuition for those learners who hold medical cards, unemployment benefit or other forms of social welfare. Other participants are eligible for fees.

FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council – FETAC was set up as a statutory body on 11 June 2001 by the Minister for Education and Science under the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999. FETAC has responsibility for making awards previously made by NCVA (National Council for Vocational Awards), FAS (State Training and Employment Authority), CERT (Tourism and Catering), Teagasc (Agriculture and Food Development Authority) and BIM (Bord Iscaigh Mhara – Fisheries Board) and has made over 500,000 awards to date. FETAC makes awards from Levels 1 – 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

NFQ - National Framework of Qualifications - The National Framework of Qualifications, the NFQ came about through the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and launched in 2003. It is a system of ten levels that incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. FETAC awards are made from Levels 1 to 6 on the framework. Level 1 is at certificate level and Level 10 is doctoral level. Levels 7 – 10 on the NFQ are awarded by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

NQAI - National Qualifications Authority of Ireland - The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established on 26 February 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Authority is an agency of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. It has responsibility for developing and maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications.

Third Level Allowance (now the Back to Education Allowance). This is an educational opportunity scheme for unemployed people and lone parents. BTEA replaces the Second and Third Level allowance schemes previously administered by the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs. The

allowances are payable to people who wish to pursue approved second or third level educational courses. BTEA is not an unemployment payment, participants receive a standard rate of payment which is not means tested. In order to qualify for the BTEA learners must be at least 21 years of age (or 24 for third level postgraduate courses) and in receipt of social welfare for at least six months.

VEC – Vocational Education Committee. Established in 1930 through the Vocational Education Act (1930) to provide continuation education and vocational and technical training for young people (intended for the age range fourteen to sixteen). They were under secular control rather than the control of Catholic church. VECs (of which there are 33) now provide further education courses accredited by a number of awarding bodies (e.g. FETAC, BTEC etc) for both school leavers and adults returning to education.

VTOS - Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme. First established in 1989 as a special initiative designed to cater for the education and training needs of the long term unemployed. Participants in the scheme receive a training allowance equivalent to their social welfare entitlement had they remained on the live register. They are also paid travel, where they reside more than three miles from the centre, and meal allowances. The courses provided under the scheme are free of charge. There is no charge for books or course materials. VTOS offers unemployed people an opportunity of returning to structured learning in an adult setting. VTOS is funded by the Department of Education and Science under the National Development Plan 2007 - 2013 and it is delivered in over 100 locations throughout the country by the thirty-three VECs (Vocational Education Committees). To qualify for VTOS learners must be 21 years or over and in receipt of social welfare for a minimum of six months. Participants can receive VTOS for two years and then they transfer to the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)

Programmes offered under VTOS are education-led, vocationally-oriented and progression-focused. The programmes give participants the opportunity of:

- Raising their education levels
- gaining certification within the national framework of qualifications
- developing knowledge and skills relevant to the workplace
- progressing to employment or to further education or training leading to employment.

The range of learning opportunities provided by VTOS centres includes:

- Junior Certificate
- Leaving Certificate
- Courses leading to a FETAC award at Level 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications
- Courses leading to a FETAC award at Level 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications
- Courses leading to a FETAC award at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications

Appendix 1 – Letters and consent forms

Individual interviews with learners

Dear

As part of my own continuing study I am currently engaged in research examining the ways in which adults who return to education learn what it means and how to ‘become’ to be an adult learner’ in the college and also what is expected of them when they come back to education. As part of the research I am holding interviews with adult learners, college tutors, deputy principal and principal and the CEO. I would be grateful if you would agree to take part in an individual interview. If you agree to take part in the research the following conditions will apply:

1. I guarantee that no participant will be identified during any stage of the research and that participants will not be named or identified in the final thesis. The college will not be named in the thesis
2. Participants retain the right at all times to withdraw at any stage from the research process and the right to opt back in to the process should they wish to do so
3. The college will not be identified or named in any reports or in the final thesis
4. Participants will be given transcripts of their digitally recorded interview should they wish
5. Any data obtained from participants will be kept in a safe secure place which is only accessible to the researcher. The data will be available only to me, the examiners and supervisor. It will be securely stored (and password protected) until after the examination has taken place and the final thesis submitted
6. I will not use any information given by participants without their express consent

If you wish to clarify any points regarding the research please do not hesitate to do so. If you agree to take part in this research please sign the attached consent form retaining the second copy for yourself.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and taking part in this research

Yours sincerely

Paula Faller

Statement of consent

I _____ agree to take part in an individual interview for the research study outlined above. I understand and agree to the conditions laid out in this letter and I understand that at any stage I can withdraw my participation from this study.

Signed _____

Date _____

Focus group interviews with learners

Dear

As part of my own continuing study I am currently engaged in research examining the ways in which adults who return to education learn what it means and how to 'become' to be an adult learner' in the college and also what is expected of them when they come back to education. As part of the research I am holding interviews with adult learners, college tutors, deputy principal and principal and the CEO. I would be grateful if you would agree to take part in a focus group interview. If you agree to take part in the research the following conditions will apply:

1. I guarantee that no participant will be identified during any stage of the research and that participants will not be named or identified in the final thesis. The college will not be named in the thesis
2. Participants retain the right at all times to withdraw at any stage from the research process and the right to opt back in to the process should they wish to do so
3. The college will not be identified or named in any reports or in the final thesis
4. Participants will be given transcripts of contribution to the digitally recorded interview should they wish
5. Any data obtained from participants will be kept in a safe secure place which is only accessible to the researcher. The data will be available only to me, the examiners and supervisor. It will be securely stored (and password protected) until after the examination has taken place and the final thesis submitted
6. I will not use any information given by participants without their express consent

If you wish to clarify any points regarding the research please do not hesitate to do so. If you agree to take part in this research please sign the attached consent form retaining the second copy for yourself.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and taking part in this research

Yours sincerely

Paula Faller

Statement of consent

I _____ agree to take part in a focus group interview for the research study outlined above. I understand and agree to the conditions laid out in this letter and I understand that at any stage I can withdraw my participation from this study.

Signed _____

Date _____

Individual interviews with tutors and managers

Dear

As part of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD) with The Open University I am currently engaged in a research study examining the ways in which adults who return to education learn 'who' and 'how' to be and fit in when they return to education and how they come to know what is expected of them.

As part of the research I am undertaking interviews with adult learners, college tutors, deputy principal, principal and CEO. I would be grateful if you would agree to take part in this process. If you agree to take part in the research the following conditions will apply:

1. I guarantee to maintain the anonymity of all participants at all times
2. Participants retain the right at all times to withdraw at any stage from the research process and the right to opt back in to the process should they wish to do so
3. The college will not be identified or named in any reports or in the final thesis
4. Participants will be given transcripts of their interview tape should they wish
5. Any data obtained from participants will be kept in a safe secure place which is only accessible to the researcher. The data will be available only to me, the examiners and supervisor. It will be securely stored (and password protected) until after the examination has taken place and the final thesis submitted
6. I will not use any information given by participants without their express consent

If you wish to clarify any points regarding the research please do not hesitate to do so.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and taking part in this research

Yours sincerely

Paula Faller

Statement of consent

I _____ agree to take part in an individual interview for the research study outlined above. I understand and agree to the conditions laid out in this letter and I understand that at any stage I can withdraw my participation from this study.

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix 2 – Letter requesting access to conduct study in the college

Re: Access to information and ethical statement in relation to EdD research

Dear _____

I am currently doing research towards the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD) which will be awarded by The Open University. The aim of the study is to explore the ways in which adult learners come to know what's expected of them and learn to fit in when they come back to formal education. As part of this research study I would like to interview adult learners in the return to education course, course tutors and managers. I would also like to access documentary data in the form of course planning material, college promotional literature and curricular documents relating to the course.

I would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss this research project with you and I obtain your written consent as the principal of this college to conduct the research study in the college.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter

Yours sincerely

Paula Faller

Appendix 3 – Interview questions

Individual and focus group interview schedule for adult learners

Central research question (CRQ)

What are the desired aspirational behaviours that an adult learner needs to learn/acquire in order to fit in and through what practices are these behaviours mediated?

Theory questions (TQ)

TQ1

In what ways does the notion of the aspirational myth of the ‘adult learner’ impact on the construction of adult learners’ identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme?

IQ1

1. What made you return to education at the time you did? What were the main reasons?
2. Can you remember your interview for the course? What was it like?
3. How did you feel coming into the college in the first few weeks of the course?
4. What or who helped you with these feelings? What made it easier? (or is this an assumption that it did get easier? What if it did not?)
5. What did you think is expected of you coming back to college as an adult learner?
6. What do you think is the general feeling in the college towards adult learners? (will need to expand on this and phrase it in a way that gets at ethos etc. Use atmosphere, approach etc to clarify)
7. What ways that you feel adult learners are expected to behave in class?
8. How do you learn about these particular ways to behave? In what ways do you pick this up?
9. What does being an adult learner coming back to formal education mean to you?(In what ways do you think about yourself as an adult student? How does it make you feel? What (if any) changes have you experienced within yourself?)

TQ2

What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult education curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these 'right' kinds of knowledge?

IQ2

1. What do you think are the most important things that adults coming back to education should learn during their course?
2. Of all the subjects that are offered in the course which ones do you think are the most important and why? **Or the subjects that you have studied this year**
3. Why do you think the college runs courses for adults wishing to return to education? **(what is the point or purpose of having these courses?)**
4. What subjects do you think are the least important? Why do you think this?
5. What do you think is the purpose/function of the non-assessed subjects in the curriculum/timetable?

TQ3

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social and cultural capital?

1. Are there any particular things (e.g. knowledge, skills etc) that you have learned during the course so far that you have been able to use in other areas of your life?
2. What kinds of emphasis do you feel are placed on progression from the Return to Learning course into employment and/or further study? What types of messages about these have you received so far? Did you feel there was any greater emphasis on one more than the other (e.g. work or further study)?
3. What do you think the course is educating you to do or to be? What will you be able to do after you have finished this course?

TQ4

Through which practices in the educational institution are the desired aspirational behaviours mediated?

1. What sort of different messages do tutors give out about what they expect from adult learners in their particular classes?
2. As an adult learner, how do you come to know how to write assignments, manage your time, behave in class etc?
3. How would you describe the attitude and approach of the college management (i.e. principal, deputy principal etc) towards adult learners in the college?
4. How did you learn to fit in when you came back to education (or did you feel that you learned to fit in – what are the features/characteristics of fitting in?)
5. In what ways do you feel adult learners are supported in the college?
6. What types of concessions (flexibility re attendance, deadlines etc) do you feel should be made for adult learners? (ask respondent to expand on why these concessions are needed)

Are there any other comments you'd like to make?

Interview questions for graduates of return to education course

Central research question (CRQ)

What are the desired aspirational behaviours that an adult learner needs to learn/acquire in order to fit in and through what practices are these behaviours mediated?

Theory questions (TQ)

TQ1

In what ways does the notion of the aspirational myth of the 'adult learner' impact on the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme?

IQ1

1. What made you return to education at the time you did? What were the main reasons?
2. How did you feel coming into the college in the first few weeks of the course?
3. What or who helped you with these feelings? What made it easier? (or is this an assumption that it did get easier? What if it did not?)
4. What did you think is expected of you coming back to college as an adult learner?
5. What do you think is the general feeling in the college towards adult learners? (will need to expand on this and phrase it in a way that gets at ethos etc. Use atmosphere, approach etc to clarify)
6. What ways that you feel adult learners are expected to behave in class? In the return to education course how did you learn about these particular ways to behave? In what ways do you pick this up?
7. What does being an adult learner coming back to formal education mean to you? (In what ways do you think about yourself as an adult student? How does it make you feel? What (if any) changes have you experienced within yourself?)

8. What are the differences in the ways adult learners are treated in the return to education course and your current course?

TQ2

What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult education curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these 'right' kinds of knowledge?

IQ2

1. What do you think are the most important things that adults coming back to education should learn during their course?
2. Of all the subjects that are offered in the return to education course which ones do you think were the most important and why? **Or the subjects that you have studied this year**
3. In what ways did these subjects help you (**check if they did**) when you moved into the higher level course?
4. Why do you think the college runs courses for adults wishing to return to education? (**what is the point or purpose of having these courses?**)
5. What subjects do you think are the least important? Why do you think this?
6. What do you think is the purpose/function of the non-assessed subjects in the curriculum/timetable?

TQ3

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social and cultural capital?

1. Are there any particular things (e.g. knowledge, skills etc) that you have learned during the course so far that you have been able to use in other areas of your life – for example in your job?
2. What kinds of emphasis do you feel are placed on progression from the Return to Learning course into employment and/or further study? What types of messages did you receive on the course? Did you feel there was any greater emphasis on one more than the other (e.g. work or further study)

3. What did you think that doing the course would prepare you for, help you to become? What did you think you might do when you had finished the course?

Central research question (CRQ)

TQ4

Through which practices in the educational institution are the desired aspirational behaviours mediated?

1. In your current course what sort of different messages do tutors give out about what they expect from learners in their particular classes?
2. What are the differences in the messages you get from tutors in your current course compared with the return to education course?
3. As an adult learner, how did you learn how to write assignments, manage your time, behave in class etc?
4. How would you describe the attitude and approach of the college management (i.e. principal, deputy principal etc) towards adult learners in the college?
5. How did you learn to fit in when you came back to education (or did you feel that you learned to fit in – what are the features/characteristics of fitting in?)
6. In what ways do you feel adult learners are supported in the college? Is there a difference between the two courses? (if yes, elaborate on differences)
7. What types of concessions (flexibility re attendance, deadlines etc) do you feel should be made for adult learners? (ask respondent to expand on why these concessions are needed)

5. How do adult learners learn to negotiate their way around the

Are there any other comments you'd like to make?

6. What do you feel are the best types of assessment methods for adult learners? How do you feel assessment processes (assignments, exams, tutor feedback etc) affect adult learners?

7. What particular principles or teaching methodologies do you feel are important when working with adults needing to catch up?

Interview questions for tutors

Central research question (CRO)

What are the desired aspirational behaviours that an adult learner needs to learn/acquire in order to fit in and through what practices are these behaviours mediated?

Theory questions (TQ)

TQ1

In what ways does the notion of the aspirational myth of the 'adult learner' impact on the construction of adult learners' identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme?

IQ 1

- 1. Do you think that in this college we have a particular ethos regarding adult learners and if you do, how would you describe that ethos? Are there different ways that adult learners in the return to education course are treated compared with adult learners in other courses?**
- 2. What kinds of different messages do you think we give to adult learners about the 'type' of adult learner we want them to be?**
- 3. In what different ways are these messages transmitted? How might adult learners pick these messages up?**
- 4. What do you expect from adult learners in the college? Are there any particular expectations that you think we have regarding adult learners?**
- 5. How do adult learners learn to negotiate their way around the timetable, the curriculum, the assessment processes? How do they learn what is expected of them?**
- 6. What do you feel are the best types of assessment methods for adult learners? How do you feel assessment processes (assignments, exams, tutor feedback etc) affect adult learners?**
- 7. What particular pedagogies or teaching methodologies do you feel are important when working with adults returning to education?**

TQ2

What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult education curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these 'right' kinds of knowledge?

IQ 2

1. What do you think the purpose of the non-accredited subjects in the curriculum? What do you see as the value of the non-assessed modules that are offered in the curriculum?
2. When you think about the particular curriculum that we offer adult learners, do you think that it is necessarily the right one? What changes would you make to the curriculum? What do you think the current curriculum is educating them to 'be'?
3. What are the most important things that adults coming back to education need to learn during their course?
4. What modules do you see as the most valuable for adult learners in the current curriculum?
5. What particular constraints do you think exist within the curriculum that we provide for adult learners?

TQ3

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social and cultural capital?

IQ 3

1. What do you think is the purpose of the Return to Education course? What progression routes do you feel are available to adult learners when they complete the course? What do you see as the value of the course in terms of its currency for progression?
2. 'What' or 'whom' are we educating adult learners to be? What kinds of things do you feel they learn during this course?
3. What messages do you feel that adult learners might pick up from tutors regarding the value of employment routes or higher education routes?
4. What would you like to see adult learners achieve for themselves both during and after their two years in the college?

TQ4

Through which practices in the educational institution are the desired aspirational behaviours mediated?

IQ 4

1. What concessions (if any) do you feel should be made for adult learners in the return to education course? (for example, assignment deadlines, attendance etc)
2. What messages do you feel you give out as a tutor regarding your expectations of adult learners?
3. What supports do you feel that adult learners coming back to education should have? Which of these supports do you feel you provide?
4. What are the differences (probe – different courses/practices etc) between the support practices in the return to education course and other courses?
5. What do you do (if anything) differently (class interactions, deadlines etc) when working with adult learners?

Are there any other comments you'd like to make?

Interview questions for managers

Central research question (CRO)

What are the desired aspirational behaviours that an adult learner needs to learn/acquire in order to fit in and through what practices are these behaviours mediated?

Theory questions (TQ)

TQ1

In what ways does the notion of the aspirational myth of the ‘adult learner’ impact on the construction of adult learners’ identity, subject positioning and sense of place in a Return to Education programme?

IQ 1

1. Do you think that in this college we have a particular ethos regarding adult learners and if you do, how would you describe that ethos?
2. What kinds of different messages do you think we give to adult learners about the ‘type’ of adult learner we want them to be?
3. In what different ways are these messages transmitted? How might adult learners pick these messages up?
4. What do you expect from adult learners in the college?
5. What are the most important things that adults coming back to education need to learn during their course?
6. How do adult learners negotiate their way around the timetable, the curriculum, the assessment processes? How do they learn what is expected of them?
7. What expectations do you think that adult returners have of the college, the course and the staff?

TQ2

What types of knowledge are posited as valid and legitimate in the adult education curriculum and in what ways do adults returning to education come to access these 'right' kinds of knowledge?

IQ 2

1. What do you see as the value of the non-assessed modules that are offered in the curriculum?
2. When you think about the particular curriculum that we offer adult learners do you think that it is necessarily the 'right' one? What changes would you make to the curriculum? What do you think the current curriculum is educating them to 'be'?
3. What modules do you see as the most valuable for adult learners in the current curriculum?
4. What particular constraints do you think exist within the curriculum that we provide for adult learners?
5. What is your interpretation of the 'hidden curriculum'? How do you think it manifests itself? In what ways do you feel that adult learners might pick up messages around the hidden curriculum?
6. If you were designing a general 'adult education' curriculum (not necessarily tied into a FETAC or other award), what would you include in it and why? What skills and types of knowledge should a course provide (apart from specialist subject knowledge)

TQ3

In what ways are adult learners returning to education facilitated or denied access to more privileged forms of social and cultural capital?

IQ 3

1. What do you think is the purpose of the Return to Education course?
2. 'What' or 'whom' are we educating adult learners to be? What kinds of things do you feel they learn during this course?
3. What are the most important things that adult learners might learn from each other?
4. What kinds of emphasis is placed on progression routes for adults coming back to education? What messages do we give to learners about employment prospects and about further/higher education opportunities?

5. What would you like to see adult learners achieve for themselves both during and after their two years in the college?
6. What is your vision of this college as an agent of change in tackling educational disadvantage with regard to adult learners? What can we do to help break the culture of 'it's not for the likes of me' that exists in some communities?

TQ4

Through which practices in the educational institution are the desired aspirational behaviours mediated?

IQ 4

1. What expectations do you think you have for adult learners during their time in this college?
2. What particular pedagogies or teaching methodologies do you feel are important when working with adults returning to education?
3. What supports do you feel that adult learners need when they come back to education? Are there particular ways that you feel adult learners are treated in the return to education course (compared with other courses)?
4. What do you feel are the best types of assessment methods for adult learners? How do you feel assessment processes (assignments, exams, tutor feedback etc) affect adult learners?
5. Many staff working with adult returners do not have any training in adult education – are there any particular areas of training that you feel tutors might need to have to work with adult learners?

Are there any other comments you'd like to make?

Appendix 4 – Letter requesting permission to use quotations

Dear

Thank you for participating in an interview in relation to the research that I am conducting. In accordance with ethical procedures in research I am now writing to request your permission to quote some of your interview material in my final thesis.

As stated in my original letter, interview participants will not be identified in the final thesis. Quotes will not be attributed to participants in any way that will identify them. For the purposes of the final thesis the name of the college will not be revealed.

If you give your permission to allow some quotations from your interview to be included in the final work, please sign **ONE COPY** of this letter and return it to me in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope. If you wish to discuss anything in relation to this letter and the research process please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you once again for being a participant in this research

Yours sincerely

Paula Faller

Statement of consent

I _____ consent to the use of
some quotations from my interview in the final research thesis of
Paula Faller

Date _____

Appendix 5 – FETAC Level 5 Community & Health Services award

COMMUNITY & HEALTH SERVICES

DCHSX

Vocational Modules (5)

Mandatory

TWO of the following modules:

Anatomy & Physiology

[D20001](#)

Care Provision & Practice

[D20003](#)

Child Development

[D20005](#)

Early Childhood Education

[D20007](#)

Safety & Health at Work

[D20165](#)

Human Growth and Development

[D20032](#)

Introduction to Nursing

[D20012](#)

Elective

Legal Studies

[B20132](#)

Social Studies

[G20031](#)

An appropriate approved module

General Studies Modules (2)

Communications

[G20001](#)

and one other General Studies module

Work Experience Module (1)

Work Experience

[W20008](#)

Appendix 6 – Specific Learning Outcomes – Human Growth and Development

	8.4	develop interpersonal/interactive skills appropriate to responding to the needs of others
	8.5	apply skills and knowledge to typical work based problems
	8.6	develop self-confidence and empathy in dealing with people.
9	Units	The specific learning outcomes are grouped into 3 units.
	Unit 1	The Psychology of Childhood
	Unit 2	The Psychology of Adolescence
	Unit 3	The Psychology of Adulthood
10	Specific Learning Outcomes	
	Unit 1	The Psychology of Childhood
		<i>Learners should be able to:</i>
	10.1.1	discuss their own experience of childhood with reference to toys, games and early memories
	10.1.2	briefly outline common theories of child development
	10.1.3	outline the normal pattern of development from conception through childhood to early adolescence with reference to physical, emotional, social and intellectual development
	10.1.4	state the importance of secure attachments to the development of the child
	10.1.5	recognise variations within the normal range of child development.
	Unit 2	The Psychology of Adolescence
		<i>Learners should be able to:</i>
	10.2.1	outline the normal pattern of development in adolescence, with reference to physical, emotional, social and intellectual development

- 10.2.2** outline the factors that influence the personality development of the adolescent, to include: family and peer relations; gender influences and societal influences
- 10.2.3** discuss common issues that arise in adolescence e.g. relationships formation, deviant behaviour
- 10.2.4** discuss the effectiveness of a range of strategies employed to assist adolescents with interpersonal relationships and other problems perceived by the adolescent.

Unit 3 The Psychology of Adulthood

Learners should be able to:

- 10.3.1** identify the different stages of adulthood - young adult, adult and mature, independent adult
- 10.3.2** outline the normal pattern of development at different stages of adulthood with reference to physical, emotional, intellectual and social development
- 10.3.3** outline the main effects that different goals/motivations have on a person's behaviour and lifestyle at the different stages of adulthood e.g. career, values/beliefs, responsibilities, relationships, peer group pressure
- 10.3.4** identify a range of adult needs and the interpersonal skills required to meet these needs in a variety of situations:
- need for achievement, purpose in life
 - need for self-esteem
 - need for values in life e.g. spiritual
 - need for self-fulfilment
 - individual differences relating to adults e.g. cultural, ethnic
- 10.3.5** outline the range of interpersonal skills required for personal contact and positive relationships with the older adult in need of care
- 10.3.6** discuss death and dying in the context of late adulthood.

Appendix 7 – Examination questions for FETAC Human Growth and Development

Examination paper 2006

Q.1 Write short notes on FIVE of the following:

- Physical changes in adolescence
- Drug addiction
- Coping with grief and bereavement
- Maslow's hierarchy of needs
- Major social problems/issues in adolescence
- Interpersonal skills
- Problems in adulthood
- Role of community in caring for the elderly (5 x 4 marks)

20 marks

Q.2 Erik Erikson's lifespan theory has greatly influenced how we think and what we understand about psychological development throughout life.

- (a). List Erik Erikson's eight stages of development.(8 x 1 marks)
- (b). Identify and comment on the developmental stage that occurs during adolescence. (4 marks)
- (c). Comment on two ways in which Freud and Erikson's explanations of development differ. (2 x 4 marks)

20 marks

Q3 (a) Jean Piaget is one of the main theorists associated with cognitive development.

(A) Identify the four developmental stages and the appropriate ages described by Piaget.

(4 x 1 marks)

(B) Describe each of the four stages briefly.

(4 x 3 marks)

(C) Write notes on two of the following and give a good example of each concept :

- (i) Egocentrism.
- (ii) Object Permanence.
- (iii) Conservation.

(2 x 2 marks)

20 marks

Q4. Freud is regarded as the father of psychoanalysis. Much of his work revolved around his theories of personality development.

(A) Name three techniques used by Freud for exploring the “unconscious”.

(3 x 1 marks)

(B) Name the three elements that Freud believed made up one's personality.

(3 x 1 marks)

(C) Name and describe the main characteristics of Freud's first three stages of psychosexual development.

(3 x 3 marks)

(D) Outline two criticisms of Freud's work.

(2 x 2.5 marks)

20 marks

Q5. (a) Define what is meant by the term attachment

(4 marks)

(b) List four major factors that can negatively affect attachment

(4 x 1 mark)

(c) Identify four major factors that can positively affect attachment

(4 x 1 marks)

(d) Briefly explain Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation

(8 marks)

20 marks

Appendix 8 – FETAC assessment principles, methods and techniques

FETAC Assessment Principles

- 1 Assessment is regarded as an integral part of the learning process.**
- 2 All FETAC assessment is criterion referenced. Each assessment technique has assessment criteria which detail the range of marks to be awarded for specific standards of knowledge, skills and competence demonstrated by candidates.**
- 3 The mode of assessment is generally local i.e. the assessment techniques are devised and implemented by internal assessors in centres.**
- 4 Assessment techniques in FETAC modules are valid in that they test a range of appropriate learning outcomes.**
- 5 The reliability of assessment techniques is facilitated by providing support for assessors.**
- 6 Arising from an extensive consultation process, each FETAC module describes what is considered to be an optimum approach to assessment. When the necessary procedures are in place, it will be possible for assessors to use other forms of assessment, provided they are demonstrated to be valid and reliable.**
- 7 To enable all learners to demonstrate that they have reached the required standard, candidate evidence may be submitted in written, oral, visual, multimedia or other format as appropriate to the learning outcomes.**
- 8 Assessment of a number of modules may be integrated, provided the separate criteria for each module are met.**
- 9 Group or team work may form part of the assessment of a module, provided each candidate's achievement is separately assessed.**

Glossary of Assessment Techniques

Assignment

An exercise carried out in response to a brief with specific guidelines and usually of short duration.

Each assignment is based on a brief provided by the internal assessor. The brief includes specific guidelines for candidates. The assignment is carried out over a period of time specified by the internal assessor.

Assignments may be specified as an oral presentation, case study, observations, or have a detailed title such as audition piece, health fitness plan or vocational area profile.

Collection of Work

A collection and/or selection of pieces of work produced by candidates over a period of time that demonstrates the mastery of skills.

Using guidelines provided by the internal assessor, candidates compile a collection of their own work. The collection of work demonstrates evidence of a range of specific learning outcomes or skills. The evidence may be produced in a range of conditions, such as in the learning environment, in a role play exercise, or in real-life/work situations.

This body of work may be self-generated rather than carried out in response to a specific assignment eg art work, engineering work etc

Examination

A means of assessing a candidate's ability to recall and apply skills, knowledge and understanding within a set period of time (time constrained) and under clearly specified conditions.

Examinations may be:

- practical, assessing the mastery of specified practical skills demonstrated in a set period of time under restricted conditions
- oral, testing ability to speak effectively in the vernacular or other languages
- interview-style, assessing learning through verbal questioning, on one-to-one/group basis
- aural, testing listening and interpretation skills
- theory-based, assessing the candidate's ability to recall and apply theory, requiring responses to a range of question types, such as objective, short answer, structured, essay. These questions may be answered in different media such as in writing, orally etc.

Learner Record

A self-reported record by an individual, in which he/she describes specific learning experiences, activities, responses, skills acquired.

Candidates compile a personal logbook/journal/diary/daily diary/record/laboratory notebook/sketch book.

The logbook/journal/diary/daily diary/record/laboratory notebook/sketch book should cover specified aspects of the learner's experience.

Project

A substantial individual or group response to a brief with guidelines, usually carried out over a period of time.

Projects may involve:

- research – requiring individual/group investigation of a topic
- process – eg design, performance, production of an artefact/event

Projects will be based on a brief provided by the internal assessor or negotiated by the candidate with the internal assessor. The brief will include broad guidelines for the candidate. The work will be carried out over a specified period of time.

Projects may be undertaken as a group or collaborative project, however the individual contribution of each candidate must be clearly identified.

The project will enable the candidate to demonstrate: (*some of these – about 2-4*)

- understanding and application of concepts in (specify area)
- use/selection of relevant research/survey techniques, sources of information, referencing, bibliography
- ability to analyse, evaluate, draw conclusions, make recommendations
- understanding of process/planning implementation and review skills/ planning and time management skills
- ability to implement/produce/make/construct/perform
- mastery of tools and techniques
- design/creativity/problem-solving/evaluation skills
- presentation/display skills
- team working/co-operation/participation skills.

Skills

Demonstration

Assessment of mastery of specified practical, organisational and/or interpersonal skills.


These skills are assessed at any time throughout the learning process by the internal assessor/another qualified person in the centre for whom the candidate undertakes relevant tasks.

The skills may be demonstrated in a range of conditions, such as in the learning environment, in a role-play exercise, or in a real-life/work situations.

The candidate may submit a written report/supporting documentation as part of the assessment.

Examples of skills: laboratory skills, computer skills, coaching skills, interpersonal skills.

Appendix 9 – FETAC Work Experience (APEAL)

<p>Individual Candidate Marking Sheet</p> <p>APEAL</p>		<p>Work Experience W20008</p> <p>Learner Record 80%</p> <p>Assignment 20%</p>
--	---	--

Candidate Name: _____ **PPSN.:** _____

Centre: _____ **Centre No.:** _____

Assessment Criteria	Maximum Mark	Candidate Mark
Learner Record <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • detailed job description, listing specific elements of job and responsibilities • detailed and comprehensive account of activities and events during work • completed CV included • reference is recent, verifiable, and work is related to course of study* <p>* Candidates must receive 0% if record of work with reference is not verified</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review is considered and includes critical reflection on experiences • insightful analysis and evaluation of own participation and progress during work • learning from personal and vocational experiences related to career aspirations and plans • in-depth understanding of the value of vocational qualifications in pursuing career plans 	20	
Subtotal	80	
Assignment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comprehensive profile of vocational area with detailed description of occupation and qualifications • in-depth understanding and analysis of employment and career opportunities in the vocational area 	20	
Subtotal	20	
TOTAL MARKS	100	
<i>This mark should be transferred to the Module Results Summary Sheet</i>		

Internal Assessor's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

External Authenticator's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 10 – FETAC Level 5 Certificate in Liberal Arts

Level 5 Certificate in Liberal Arts

Level 5 ELAXX			
Requirement	Code	Title	Value
All of the following components			
	L22283	Personal and Professional Development	1
	L22284	Applied Communications	1
A value of 6 from the following components			
	B10009	Computer Applications	0.5
	B10135	Information Technology Skills	0.5
	C10139	Mathematics	0.5
	C20139	Mathematics	1
	E20008	Media Analysis	1
	G20022	Political Studies	1
	G20031	Social Studies	1
	L22285	History	1
	L22286	English Literature	1
	L22309	Philosophy	1
	L22310	Classical Studies	1
	L22541	Applied Psychology	1
	N22789	Psychology	1
	ZNY1L5	Any other Level 5 Component	1

Notes: Learners may submit a maximum of two components from Level 4 and a maximum of one component from Level 6.

Components from Level 4 will have a value of 0.5 while those from Level 6 will have a value of 1 unless otherwise specified.

Providers: if you intend to offer this award to your learners, please ensure that your programme is registered with FETAC via the website at <http://progreg.fetac.ie/>